

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STELLA MARIS CATHOLIC CHURCH, ABAYI-ABA

Stella Maris Catholic Church, Abayi-Aba as we know it today, started in 1988 and the seed of the church was sown in 1979, when a devout Catholic and then Principal of Ngwa High School, Aba, Mr. Ralph O. Onyeaghala invited the Parish Priest of Holy Trinity Church, Obuzor to minister to the spiritual needs of his Catholic students.

The priest, Rev fr Charles Nwamaghioha (Late) soon started visiting the school for masses. Catholics around the school who hitherto had been attending masses in far away CKC, St Eugene, SS Anthony & jude and Holy Trinity Obuzor joined the students in their worship. This was the nucleus of the Catholic Church in Abayi.

When a Campus of Imo State University premises was sited at Ngwa High School, Abayi Aba, a vibrant community made up of students and staff of the university and the neighborhood Catholics soon sprang up.

Jurisdiction at this point in time over the new church at Abayi passed on to Rev. Fr Nwamaghioha (late), the then Parish Priest of SS Anthony and Jude, Umungasi Aba, where the church properly belongs. Rev. Fr. Anthony Nwogu succeeded Rev. Fr. Nwamaghioha (late) as the priest in charge of the evolving church at Abayi now recognized as an out-station of SS Anthony and Jude Umungasi Aba. Towards the end of 1981, Rev. Fr. Anthony Nwogu was replaced by Rev. Fr Gabriel Okafor who continued ministering to the church at Abayi.

Religious groups soon sprang up in the church. The Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS) was one of the most virile of them and they received moral and financial support from SS Anthony and Jude parish.

Some of the Patrons of the NFCS were Sir Eugene Nwaokonko (late) and Chief (later Eze) F. O Ogoke (late) who was also the station council chairman. The Secretary to the station then was Mr. Hyacinth Okonkwo while Mr. Christopher Amadi was the Catechist. Others who played major roles in shaping the new station then were, Mr. Leo Amanfor (NFCS President), Mr. Sylvester Mbafor (Secretary), Chief Sir and Lady F. U Akwarandu (late) and Mr. Vitalis Unachukwu (Sacristian), Mr. Amanfor and Mr. Mbafor were Co-opted into the Parish Executive Council of SS Anthony and Jude, Umungasi.

About 1983, the University moved to their main Campus at Uturu. Ngwa High School returned to its original compound and the church had new landlords. Some who barely tolerated the presence of Catholic worship. In the mean time, the search for a new site for the church begun, following a declaration by the Bishop of Umuahia Most Rev Dr. A.G. Nwedo (CSSP) (late) that he would like to have a Parish in Abayi or Osisioma area. Benson Kalu were contacted by Chief (later Eze) Ogoke (late), Sir D.S. Igbokwe (late), Mr. Lawrence Onwuegbuchulam, Chief Oliver Ukwunna (late) etc. and this resulted in the location of the present site of the church own by Umuduofor family in Egbelu Ayaba-Umuezze village. We are particularly grateful to late Sir D. S. Igbokwe for the pioneering role he played in the acquisition of these plots of land. Among the landlords of the land are Rowland Ogbonna, Elder Godwin Ogbonna, Chief Willam Ntiaju, Inspector Ojimaga, Jacob Erondu, Emma Neeobia and Ndubuisi Ochieze. The land was about five hectares in dimension.

The late Bishop Emeritus of Umuahia, Most Rev. Dr. A. G. Nwedo assisted the then Parish Priest of SS Anthony and Jude Umungasi, Rev. Fr. Gabriel Okafor to pay for

the land. Barrister Louis Okonkwo (Justice Okonkwo, Late) was the legal adviser who drafted the agreement. Access to the land from the only existing road, Umuodu road, was purchased from Chief Nath Ajaegbu who owns some parcels of land adjoining the chosen site while the alternative route to the site linking the road that leads to the Aba/Enugu Expressway was donated by Sir Ben Nnadozie (late), working in concert with his landlord Mr. Irondi Nnakwu.

The fortunes of the Church at Ngwa High School after the exit of the University depended on who was the Principal of the college. Under Catholic Principals such as late sir C. O. P Uzor and Sir S. Mbamalu there was no problem with accommodation for worships and store the church property. The same could not be said when the headship of the school changed to other hands. At the height of this discomfort which the early Catholic Faithful experienced at Ngwa High school, relocation became an absolute imperative. Luckily Rev Fr Gabriel Okofor had completed the task of purchasing the land for the new site. He was succeeded by Rev. Monsignor Cosmos Obiego (late). Chief Sir James Nworgu (KSM) was now Chairman of the Station Council and Ezinne Regina Egeleponu (late) was the CWO president. Both Monsignor Obiego and Chief Nworgu, under the pressure of the hostile environment of the church at Ngwa High School mobilize the faithful at Abayi to start work on the new site. The hostility worked for the good of the Church because it galvanized the leadership of quicken their actions, The zeal, patience, endurance and perseverance of aforementioned pioneer Priests and the unflagging zeal and steadfastness of the faithful ensured the take-off of work on the new station.

With various contribution from the aforementioned pioneer Priests and the other lay faithful, work started under the craftsmanship of our church builder, Mr. Bernard C. Iheanacho. The dream of these pioneers was realized on Sunday, 1st May 1988 when the first, Holy Mass on the new site was celebrated by Rev. Fr. (now Monsignor) Obiego (late) assisted by Rev. Fr. Dr. Peter Anozie. It must be mentioned that it was the late Emeritus of Umuahia Diocese, Most Rev, Dr, A.G. Nwedo (CSSP, late) that chose from amongst the several suggested names, "STELLA MARIS" (Star of the Sea) as the name of the new church at Abayi. He communicated same writing to the then Parish Priest of SS Anthony and Jude, Umungasi, Aba Monsignor Cosmos Obiego.

Monsignor Obiego was replaced by Rev, Monsignor I. I. Alaribe (late) as the Parish Priest of

Stella Maris Parish Church, Abayi. Sir Ben Nnadozie (late) became the station chairman With Sir Polycarp Obi as the secretary. Ugoeze Lady Cecilia Ogoke (late) and Lady Charity E. Nwaukwa served as CWO presidents. Monsignor Alaribe quickly embarked on the building of the presbytery and expansion of the church building. protectors donated by Parishioners and designed by Engr. Sir Sylanus Nwosu were mounted on the windows.

In 1996, Rev. Monsignor (Dr) I. I. Alaribe became the first resident Priest of the church, Sir C. J Nwaukwa (late) became the Vice Chairman and Sir David Okeke (late) the Secretary of the Parish Council while Mr. Peter Agbisi was the Catechist, With the retirement of Mr. Agbisi in 1997, Mr. Wilfred Nnenanya became Catechist.

The assumption of the church priest of Stella Maris Abayi by Monsignor (Dr) I. I. Alaribe witnessed tremendous development. He mobilized the faithful to execute projects such as providing exit doors of the old Church building (funded by Umuahia, Ngwa, Mbaise catholic communities)

reconstructing the altar floor with marble, (funded by Joseph Obioha), Building of the sacristy, Parish main gate, provision of the Parish pipe-Born water(funded by Chief Gabriel Ndubuisi (late), but before then, water has been supplied to the parish courtesy of Sir Augustine Onyema orji (Okeosisi) (late), fans and pews were donated by various parishioners. The Church now started to wear a new look. The perimeter fencing Project was executed at this time, Among the landmarks executed at the time of Monsignor Dr. I. I. Alaribe were the podium flanked By CCRN and St. Monica halls which provided sitting and ventilated accommodation the congregation. New plots of land were also acquired by Monsignor Alaribe for future development. He laid the foundation for the two storey school block named after his name today and the CWO two storey building, The then vice chairman Sir C. J. Nwaukwa donated 5 plots of land to the parish and requested that the land should be used to create an out-station church.

Monsignor I. I. Alaribe established Stella Maris Nursery/Primary school, Mrs Dorathy Achumba became the pioneer Headmistress.

Frs Joachim Nnanna, Victor Kanu, Alex Okonkwo and Nelson Ogwuegbu (SMMM) worked with Monsignor Alaribe as Parochial Vicars.

Other Parish Councilors that worked with Dr. I. I. Alaribe include:

Ezinne Joy Ubawike Financial Secretary

Mr. F.O.C Nwachukwu Laity President

Sir Sylvanus Nwosu CMO president

Ezinne Kasarachi Ezekwe CWO president

Bro marcel iwuoma CYON President

August 17th 2002, the 1st priest of the Parish Rev. Fr. Chidi Ekpenu son of parishioner was ordained a catholic priest by His Lordship V. V Ezeonyia CSSP (late), Catholic Bishop of Aba Diocese. Other preist ordained from the Parish include: Rev. Frs Christopher Obi (2003) , Anthony Mmoh (2007), Greg Chidi Obiodu (2013) ,Gerald Chukwudi Obi (SMMM) (2014), Chistopher C. Nwanyanwu (2017), Evaristus O. asika (2018), Emmanuel A. Anyanwu (2020), chimaobi Uzome Mbawike SMMM (2021), Anthony Ibeh (2022), Maxwell Amaobi (2023), Bede princewill U.Uzoka (2023), and Rev. Cyrus Eche, who was ordained Deacon in January, 18th 2025. Some Rev. Sisters who were captured include: Perpetual Ekperi (MPHA), Rosemary Emengaha (MSBS), Rose Oriaku (TMML), Gertrude Nwogwugwu (DMMM), Regina Oluchi ahuama, Theresa Oluchi Micheal and Felicia Igwe.

In September 2002, Rev. Fr. Anthony Omenihu replaced Rev. Monsignor Dr. I. I. Alaribe as the priest of Stella Maris Church Abayi. He quickly settled down to serious evangelical business. He upgraded and forified physical structures at the Presbytery, remodeled the Podium and earnestly resumed work on the two-storey building started by his predecessor in office, He set up Education, Finance, Works and security Committees to facilitate the smooth running of the church. He also set in motion machinery for accomplishing the much awaited formal inauguration of Stella Maris Parish which Became a reality on Saturday August 2 2003. Fr. Omenihu was equally instrumental to the opening of on out-station of the Parish at

Umuamacha ie St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church and constructed St Anthony of Padua Shirine sponsored by the Guild of St Anthony.

Fr. Omenihu set up Education Committee and worked tirelessly for the take-off of Stella Maris Secondary school which was formally opened and commissioned by Monsignor Fortunatus Nwachukwu (now ArchBishop) in September 2003 with Sir B. U Anyadike as the Pioneer Principal.

Fr Anthony Omenihu had Frs. Longinus Ohaechesi and Boniface Anusiem as Parochial Vicars while Rev. Fr. Dr Innocent I. Nwokenna was in Residence. His Parish council executives were:

Sir D. O. Dike	Vice Chairman
Lady Grace Amadi	Secretary
Sir Emmanuel L. Okorie (KSJI) late	Financial Secretary
Sir Ben Nnadozie (KSJI)late	Laity President
Sir Sylvanus Nwosu (KSJI) late	CMO President
Nneoma Maria Kurumeh (late)	CWO President
Bro Stanley Udensi	CYON President, while
Mr Wilfred Nnenanya remained the	Catechist.

Rev. Fr. Edmund ogbonna took over from Fr. Omenihu. His tenure was short lived as he was battling with some health challenges.

Rev. Fr. Bona Akwarandu succeeded Fr E. Qgbonna (late). In April 2009, He expanded the landmass of the Parish and laid the foundation ceremony for the present Pro-cathedral church building in the parish with Engr. Edward Dijeh as a major donor to the project. Rev. Fr. Bona Akwarandu met Sir Dominic O. Dike and Lady Grace Amadi as the Vice Chairman and Secretary of the Parish Council respectively. Later on, Sir innocent I. Orji and Barr F. U. Nwogu were elected as Vice Chairman and Secretary of the Parish council.Fr. Bona continued his developmental stride by purchasing some plots of land for the permanent site of St. Anthony of Padua Church, Umuamacha (Out Station), He equally laid the foundation for the building of Catechist's residence and St. Ann's tuck shop.

Fr, Akworandu worked with the following as parochial Vicars: Frs Henry Uzoigwe, Godwin Nduogube, Casmir Uzosike and Anthony Onukafor (in residence). He equally worked closely with these other councilors for the achievement of the desired goal. They include:

Sir Jude C. Angdi (KSJI)	Secretary Financial
Sir Chris Ejeanobi (KSJI) (late)	Laity President
Sir Vitolis Ezirike (KSJI) (late)	CMO President
Ezinne Esther Ihemadu (late)	CWO President
Sir Magnus Uwaeme	CYON President

Rev. Fr. Leo M. Eze CSSP took over from Rev. Fr. Bona Akwarandu as the Parish Priest from Jan. 2008 to 2016. He focused mainly on pasturing the people of God in Stella Maris. He met Sir I. I. Oriji as the Vice Chairman and Barr. Fortunatus Nwogu as the Parish Secretary. He later worked with Sir Ben Nnadozi and Sir Alfred Omego as Vice Chairmen and Barr. Kelechi Okwandu as the Secretary of the Parish Council. He took up the building of the new Pro-Cathedral of the Church from DPC to roofing level and constructed the Stella Maris road with concrete drainage system. He equally expanded the landmass of Stella Maris Catholic Parish with 3 ½ plots of land. He worked closely with Chief Ernest Ifeanyichukwu Nwaocha (ksm) who gave the Parish his land property documents as a collateral for a loan granted by Chibueze Microfinance Bank to assist the roofing of the new Church. During this period, Emmanuel Mary Emenike was the Parish Catechist.

Fr. Leo Ezeji had Fr. Kevin Nwosu (CSSP), and Solomon Uba (CCE) as his Parochial vicars while Fr. Chigbu A. Chigbu was in Residence. He constructed the Holy Family Secretariat and CBIU Hall.

Other Councilors that worked with him are:

Sir. J. Anadi/Dr. E. Nwaocha	Financial Secretaries
Sir C.U Nwiwu/ Mr Chidi Ozurumba	Laity Chairmen
Sir Omego/Engr. Kelechi Ogbonna (kudos)	CMO President
Esther Ihemadu(late)/Lady V. Orji	CWO President
Bro Nonso Ozobi	CYON President
Bro Kyrian Nnanatu	P.R.O.

Rev. Fr. Stephen Ezema took over from Fr. Leo. M. Ezeji on Thursday, 22nd September, 2016. The weekly adoration (Disciples of Mercy Adoration) ministry which he introduced on his arrival and decoration of our premises further elevated the Parish. He made some renovation works at the Parish Presbytery and some construction work in the new church building especially the fixing of doors, plastering and tiling of some portions of the new church. Fr. Ezema built the Parish Grotto of the BVM, and attracted the attention of the State Governor Okezie Ikpeazu PhD for the asphaltting of the Stella Maris Parish Road from Osioma Junction to the Parish gate, a road that has been useful not only to our Parish but also to members of other churches and small scale business around the Parish. He laid the foundation of the one story building of KSM Stella Maris Sub-Council Chamber with Sir Polycarp Obi as the Grand Knight and Rev Fr. Dr. Joseph A. Anuonye as the Sub-Council Chaplain. Rev. Fr Stephen Ezema's tenure recorded increase in the numbers and spirituality of members of the Stella Maris family and he also increased the landmass of the church by the purchase of additional two plots. Fr Stephen Ezema worked with these Priests as Parochial Vicars, they include; Fr Stephen Nwokemudu. Wiliam Bassey, Christian Chinedu Ezekiel and Matthew Iwuoha.

Principal Parishioners who helped him in his work include:

Sir Alfred Omego (KSM) and Lady Patricia Okeke (LSJI), Vice Chairman and Secretary of the Parish Council respectively. Others are: Sir Ernest Ifeanyichukwu Nwaocha (KSM), Finance Chairman, Kelechi Ogbonna CMO president, but Sir Ugochukwu Akwarandu was holding brief for him;

Ezinne Irene Njoku, CWO President,
Maurice Opara, CYON President,
Bro Kyrian Nnanatu, PRO,
Mr. Innocent Akuchie, (Catechist 1),
Bro Wisdom Anyanwu , (Catechist 2).

Rev. Fr Joseph Azuka Anuonye took over on Thursday, 20th May, 2021 from Fr. Ezema as the Parish Priest of Stella Maris. On assumption of office, he met Sir Alfred Omego as Vice Chairman and Lady Patricia Okeke as the Parish Secretary. Few months later, he successfully conducted election of the Parish that brought in Sir. Dr. Nwaocha Ernest Ifeanyichukwu as Vice Chairman and Lady Patricia Okeke as the Parish Secretary. Rev. Fr. Dr. Joseph A. Anuonye has passion for doing things right and has created an atmosphere of orderliness in the Parish. Within his first year, he has re-constructed both the boys quarter and the Presbytery to new aluminum roofs. The Presbytery has taken up a modern look with beautiful landscaping, flood check and concreting of the compound floors. He re-arranged the power supply of the Presbytery to a conduct system, assisted the roofing of the CMO building, completed fibre window of the new church and has erected fences as to create access road to the two plots of land close to the Presbytery as the which were recently purchased by the Parish. He equally constructed a magnificent altar in the new church sponsored by the family of late Sir & Lady Joseph E. Obioha, courtesy of Dr. Collins Obioha (Bigfish).

Other projects concluded by the Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Joseph A. Anuonye PhD include; rehabilitation of church roofing leakage, ceiling of the church, building of Rest Room for Public use, concrete landscaping of the Church and flowering of the premises, reposition of the entrance gate, roofing and plastering of C.M.O building, provision of water system lavatory and winner of Diocesan Symbolic gift in 2024 Cathedricum at Obuzor Vicariate

Another -landmark in the annals of Fr Anuonye's administration was the Parish Silver Jubilee celebration which was held on 13th Feb, 2022. The Parish equally played host for the 2023 Diocesan Priestly Ordination. The Following Priests worked as Parochial Vicar with Fr. Anuonye; Fr Obinna Eze, Charles E. Samuel, Daniel O. Nwokoma, Bruno Peter-Anaba and Bernard C. aramu.

It is worthy of note to mention the following names; Sir Nwaocha Ernest Ifeanyichukwu PhD (Vice Chairman Parish Council), Lady Patricia Okeke, Secretary, Parish Council, Sir Joannes Nwosu, Assistant secretary, Robert Mba, Financial Secretary/ Chairman Finance, Lady Gloria Eche, Finance Secretary, Bro Matthew Obiodu, Laity Chairman, Chief Sir Ugochukwu Akwarandu, CMO President, Lady Eucharia U. Osuala, CWO President, Bro Uchechi G. Nwokeke, CYON President, Sir Polycarp Obi, Works Chairman and Bro. Maurice Opara, Works Secretary. These are the team of officers who worked closely and tirelessly with the Parish Priest in achieving the milestone we are celebrating today.

Rev. Fr. Paschal I. Ubah became the first Priest posted by the Diocese to be the School Manager of Stella Maris Schools. His tenure of office has witnessed tremendous growth in student population with corresponding positive performance both in BECE, WAEC and NECO

Apart from Sir Anyadike as the pioneer Principal, other principals that have headed the school are Mr. Peter Onene and Dr. Peter Ekechukwu; while the Headmistresses include, Mrs Dorothy Achumba, Mrs Helen Anyanwu, Ms Ngozi Anyanwu and Mrs Precious Achromadu.

The laity Council has been working as the Parent body in collaborating with the Parish Priests since the conception of this Parish and has recorded tremendous achievements.

The Catholic Men Organization (CMO) has risen from one group (St. Paul's) at the inception of the Parish to eight presently, namely: St Paul, St. Peter, St. Joseph, St. Vincent de Paul, St. Patrick, St. Joachim, Prince of Peace and St. Augustine. The CMO sponsored the two storey building named after Rev. Fr. Leo Madu Ezeji (cssp). The Catholic Women Organization (CWO) has equally grown from two groups (St Ann and St Theresa) to eight, namely: St Ann, St. Theresa, St. Monica, Holy Family, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Maria Assumpta, St. Agnes and St. Rita. The Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON) is not left out too. Its growth has been alarming since inception and they have contributed immensely towards the growth of the Parish.

Apart from the above, there are many pious societies designed to groom the lay faithful spiritually. These are CBIU, CCRN, CBMN, Block Rosary, Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary, Guild of St. Anthony, Holy Ghost Vocation Movement, Legion of Mary, Mary League Girl's, Eucharistic League, Divine Mercy, St Vincent de Poor Help the Needy, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Holy Childhood, and also

Liturgical groups include: the Choir, Altar Servers, the Lay Readers and Ministers of Hospitality.

We pay homage to all our parishioners both living and dead, those mentioned in this write-up and those we could not accommodate whose contributions in various ways helped in the realization of the Parish projects. Above all, we express our sincere gratitude to His Lordship Most Rev. (Prof) Augustine Ndubueze Echema, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Aba whose task it became to DEDICATE this church and he did!

May Our Blessed Mother Mary, Star of the Sea (Stella Maris) continue to pray for our Parish as we march on.

To God be all the glory.

Stella Maris! Mma anyi si na Chi.

Compiled by Lady Patricia N. Okeke (LAUX)