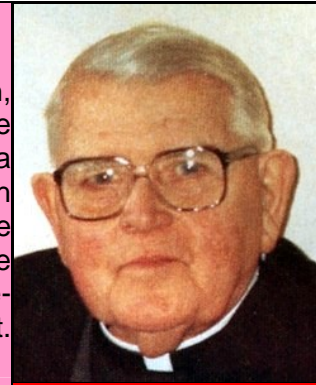


Society of African Missions – Irish Province

Michael Joseph Colleran was born at Cloonean, Hollymount, Co Mayo, in the archdiocese of Tuam, in the parish of Robeen, on 10 October 1912 (There is a dispute about the date of his birth. A copy of a birth certificate in the S.M.A. archives, Cork, records his date of birth as: 10 January 1912. Another archival source places his date of birth as 10 October 1911 and this re-appears in his official death notice). He died in St. Finbarr's hospital, Cork, on 16 October 1997.



Père Michael Colleran



**Father Michael Joseph COLLERAN (1912 - 1997)**

Michael came from a farming family, and was one of seven children. He attended Carnacon national school. During his early years he developed an interest in priesthood. In his last year in primary school Michael applied to join the Society; however his application was delayed and instead he commenced secondary schooling with the Christian Brothers, in Ballinrobe. Michael matriculated in 1930 and in the following year joined the Society as a brother aspirant. Michael wrote a 'memoir' during his retirement. Writing on his decision to become a brother rather than a priest he says: 'at the time I had a small health problem which would preclude me from going to Africa. I wanted to join the S.M.A. and to go on the Missions. The only way I could achieve my objective was to become a brother - because in those days brothers did not go to Africa'. As for the life of brotherhood in the Society he wrote: 'one led a hidden life; one did one's work humbly without receiving much appreciation; one was never in the limelight. That was a period when I learned a lot about the spiritual life, about suffering and humility''

Michael commenced his postulancy in the Society's house at Blackrock Road, Cork. After six months he undertook a two year novitiate, at the end of which he took his oath of temporary membership of the Society (14 April 1936). He took his permanent oath of membership on 14 April 1940. During his years at Blackrock Michael held a variety of positions, principally in connection with the Society's magazine, *The African Missionary*. He assisted the editor in a clerical capacity and was 'general manager' for a period. Michael also collected mite boxes in Cork city and found the people 'always most friendly and cooperative and interested in our work'. In 1937 Michael fell ill and had surgery in the Mercy hospital. After a period of convalescence he returned to Blackrock to learn that he had been appointed to the Society's new motherhouse in via dei Gracchi, Rome. The background to this appointment was related to the General Assembly of 1938. At that Assembly there was a move to underscore the Society's international character. To this end Maurice Slattery of the Irish Province was elected superior general, the first Irish member to hold that post. Furthermore the Assembly mandated Fr. Slattery to transfer the motherhouse from Lyon to Rome. There were few Irish

conferes in the mother house. Maurice was anxious to redress the balance and so sought Michael's services from the Irish Province. His request was granted.

Michael was to spend the next eight years in Rome without taking leave. During the traumatic war years and the occupation of the city by the Germans, he was a great strength to the superior general, Maurice Slattery. At the outbreak of war the S.M.A. priests studying in Rome (mainly Dutch and French) returned to their native countries. There were two Irish priests (John Flanagan and Robert Molloy), but they went home within a year. In the motherhouse, therefore, for the duration of the war, there was Fr. Slattery, Fr Piergentili (the Procurator General), Brother Erwino and Michael. Michael 'memoir', referred to above, includes a most interesting chapter on his experiences in Rome during the war. It was during the war too that Michael made an important decision. He came to the conclusion that he should study for the priesthood. Fr. Slattery gave him permission and so, in 1943, he enrolled in the Gregorian university. Michael studied for the next six years and during the fifth year, on 29 June 1948, he was ordained a priest. The ceremony took place in a college in the suburbs of Rome, Monte Mario, and the ordaining prelate was Bishop Tralia, 'Vice Regente' and later Cardinal of Rome.

By the time Michael was ordained there had been a change in the leadership of the Society, Stephen Harrington replacing Fr. Slattery as superior general in 1947. In 1950 Fr. Harrington went on an extended tour of the Society's missions, taking Michael with him as a secretary-companion. The tour lasted 10 months. Michael has left a detailed account of this fascinating trip in his 'memoir', while the Archives also retains a daily diary kept by the superior general. On his return to Rome Michael received an appointment to Liberia from his Provincial superior, Patrick M. Kelly. However Fr. Harrington had other things in mind for him. He had conceived the idea of establishing a branch of the Society in Italy and felt that Michael, with his experience of Italy, would be the man for the job. The project of founding the society in Italy, being a 'Society Work, came under the authority of the General. So Michael was seconded to the Generalate for that purpose..

The Society had always counted Italians among its members; indeed some of its most distinguished members had been Italian: Frs Borghero, Zappa, Cermenati and Frigerio. In 1950 there were two Italian members, Frs Piergentili and Spampinati, but neither were willing or suitable for foundation work. Michael, in consultation with Fr. Harrington, decided to locate the first foundation house in Genoa, principally because the archdiocese of Genoa was one of the very few in Italy that had no established missionary body. Genoa, the home of Christopher Columbus, had both Irish and Society associations. It was the place where Daniel O'Connell died; and it was here, too, that the Irish Province's first bishop, Thomas Broderick of Western Nigeria, died in 1933. Michael recalls in his 'memoir' that the Italian bishops were missionary-minded and this was a great boon; permissions to promote the Society and, especially, to recruit in diocesan seminaries, were willingly accorded. Crucial support was given by Cardinal Siri of Genoa, who offered the Society a house capable of conversion into a seminary.

Shortly afterwards Michael had his first recruit: Fr. Giacomo Ubbiali, a student in the diocesan seminary at Bergamo. Other recruits followed and were sent to Chanly for their novitiate (a house of the French Province). Theological studies were located in the

S.M.A. seminary at Lyon, until such time as the Italian branch was capable of training its own students. In addition to recruitment and promotion, Michael had to raise funds, and in the early years he went to the U.S.A. on four occasions. Michael was a talented fund-raiser, a big man with a great presence, exuding enthusiasm, urbane, well-organised, eloquent and unwilling to take 'no' for an answer. Michael won the support of notable American ecclesiastics, including Cardinal Cushing of Boston and Archbishop Willie O'Brien of Chicago. The house at Genoa was opened and blessed by Cardinal Siri on 3 September 1960, the Feast of St. Pius X. At the time the Italian branch consisted of three priests and eight seminarians. During the following decade, under Michael's stewardship, the branch grew stronger and the first priests were despatched to Africa. The branch was erected as a District of the Society in 1968 and as a full Province on 25 March 1982. By that time it had a total of 42 members and students, serving mission fields in the Ivory Coast and Nigeria.

Michael himself had withdrawn from the branch in 1970, feeling that his work was now done and that the future was secure. He also felt it was important to lead by example and was determined to go to Africa. Hence he returned to the Irish Province and requested a missionary appointment from its Provincial, Fr. Laurence Carr. He even specified where he would like to go, having seen so much of the Society's missions during his tour with Fr. Harrington. He chose Lagos, the oldest and one of the most difficult mission in Nigeria. He got his wish. On his arrival in Nigeria, in March 1970, Archbishop John Aggey of Lagos appointed Michael 'administrator' of Holy Cross cathedral. At the time the cathedral was badly in need of refurbishment and Michael spent much of his first year accomplishing this work. He also improved the cathedral surrounds - all the finance being supplied by the people of Lagos.

Later Michael was to build a fine Community Centre. Most of Michael's considerable energy, however, was taken up with the day to day duties of a cathedral administrator: hearing confessions, celebrating Masses, performing burials, preaching novenas and attending the meetings of numerous religious organisations and societies. He also had the responsibility of organising his assistant priests. There was a further duty which he assumed willingly and to great effect. Holy Cross was one of the great cross-roads of Nigeria for missionaries. Priests, brothers and sisters, travelling from up-country to Lagos on business, or arriving in, or leaving, Nigeria, loved to call to Holy Cross. Michael is remembered within the Society and further afield as having been a magnificent host, courteous, kind, always keeping an excellent table, always welcoming.

Michael ministered in Lagos until July 1984. He then returned briefly to Italy, residing in Rome and Genoa while, at the request of his superiors, he wrote the history of the Italian Province. A year later, the work complete, he took up an appointment in the Society's Australian mission, in Perth archdiocese, as assistant in the parish of Christ the King, Beaconsfield. He spent four years in Western Australia, where he had a special ministry to Australians of Italian extraction and to Italian immigrants.

Michael retired to Blackrock Road in October 1991. In the early years of his retirement he enjoyed good health and spent much of his time writing and completing his 'memoir'. Gradually ill-health took hold and he became confined to a wheelchair. In 1996 his health deteriorated sharply and he was hospitalised on a number of occasions. Michael's nephew, Fr. James Quinn of Tuam archdiocese, was a frequent visitor to his bedside

over these years. Other family members called or kept in touch by letter and telephone. Michael, it must be stressed, was very close to his family, and took great pride in their achievements. He was also a great support to them in times of sadness or difficulty. He had, too, a number of life-long friends with whom he corresponded until the end. The end came rather quickly, a few weeks after Michael entered St. Finbarr's hospital for the last time. He had lived to a great age, celebrating his 85<sup>th</sup> (86<sup>th</sup>) days before his death. His brother, John, who had been a priest in Australia, died at the age of 60. At the time of his death Michael was the only surviving member of his family. In the Society of African Missions Michael is remembered for many things but, above all, for his work in establishing the Italian Province. He was a 'Founder', a rare distinction in the Society. Among the large number of priests who attended his Requiem Mass was Gerardo Bottarlini, the Italian Provincial superior. Michael left an extensive deposit of personal papers which are retained in the Archives of the Society in Cork. In time, it is hoped, they will help to provide the material for a full biography.

He is buried in Wilton cemetery.