

Archbishop Charles Heerey (1890-1967) Founder and First Proprietor of CKC Onitsha

Charles Heerey was born on 29 November 1889 in Oldcastle, Co. Meath, Ireland. Along with his brother, Patrick “Paddy” Heerey, he had his early education in Oldcastle and went on to study at the Blackrock College from 1905-1909.

‘Cha’ as he was fondly called, graduated from Blackrock College of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1909 and professed for two years at Rockwell. On 8 September, 1912 he made his vows at Kimmage as a member of the Congregation. He did his senior studies at Rathmines, earning a B.A., and at Kimmage in 1918. After studying Philosophy, he was ordained a Priest on 19 September, 1921 in Dublin.

After ordination, Fr. Charles Heerey left his home in Cavan for Nigeria in 1922. He had been drawn to Nigeria by his acquaintanceship with Monsignor Joseph Shanahan (later Bishop), who was based in Nigeria but had returned to Ireland for one year (1919-20), during which he interacted Fr. Heerey and other younger priests and familiarized them with the challenges in Africa and the role Irish missionaries could play, often during informal fire-side chats.

Fr. Heerey’s first appointment was to the coastal town of Calabar, in southeast part of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. His stay in Calabar there was rather short but remarkable. His pastoral productivity administrative capabilities and direct engagement with the local community would convince Bishop Shanahan to designate him as a lead foundation member for the mission to establish a seminary for a Nigerian clergy. Hence, Fr. Heerey was appointed and deployed to Igbariam, a rural town on the bank of Anambra River in the Old Onitsha Province of Eastern Nigeria. There he would establish the first junior seminary (St. Anthony’s) in Eastern Nigeria for the indigenous clergy.

In 1926, following the directive from the Holy See that Bishop Shanahan, the incumbent Bishop of Onitsha, who was in failing health should nominate a co-adjutor with right of succession, he nominated Fr. Heerey, who was barely six years into priesthood as his successor. Fr. Heerey was ordained Bishop of Onitsha on 29 May, 1927, not in his new Dioceses as planned, but in Killeshandra, after he had returned to Ireland for medical attention following his own illness. Five years later, Bishop Heerey would take over from Bishop Shanahan as the Bishop of Onitsha and in 1950 he was

upgraded to the status of a Metropolitan. Bishop Heerey thus became the first Archbishop of Onitsha archdiocese and remained in that position for thirty-five years until his death on 7, February 1967.

One of the very first acts of Bishop Heerey on assuming office was to establish a college for the training of members of the laity under his charge for leadership positions in public service. The goal was to provide able leaders for the religious and secular indigenous society. On 2 February 1933, he founded *Christ the King College, Onitsha*, as the premier educational and leadership legacy catholic institution, barely four miles from his Holy Trinity Cathedral waterside residence. The mission of the school was to facilitate, nurture and instill in youths a thirst for *goodness, discipline* and *knowledge* based on Catholic moral principles in preparation for life's journey to create a better world. Hence, the institution was dedicated to intellectual and personal growth of male youths within the context of well-rounded liberal arts education in a Catholic environment.

In September 1937, just four years after the all boys' secondary school was established, Bishop Charles Heerey wrote in a letter to Cardinal Fumasini-Biondi, the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide at the Vatican: "Our secondary school has become a famous educational establishment. The successes in public examinations have been the highest in all Nigeria including the various Government and Protestant Colleges..." After CKC, he also established many other Catholic high schools in the Onitsha province, including Queen of the Rosary College (QRC) Onitsha, which was founded in 1942 to train girls "spiritually, morally, academically, socially, and physically" to be productive members of society. The school was first located in Enugu but moved to Onitsha in 1949 and situated about half a mile from CKC Onitsha. Along the same lines, Bishop Heerey like his predecessor was also the founder several indigenous religious Orders such as the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ. He also established the St. Charles Borromeo Hospital in Onitsha.

Archbishop Heerey, who came from a family with several clergy members (an uncle, brother and distant cousin were also priests), was reputed for his vision and for being humble, quiet and reserved and very approachable. He was also very principled, which to some was misconstrued as being impetuosity, but in reality was his way of emphatically expressing his firm commitment and loyalty to principles and to the sacred trust of his high office.

Archbishop Charles Heerey died on 7, February 1967 at the age of seventy-seven (77) and was buried at the Basilica of the Holy Trinity in Onitsha. He was succeeded by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Francis Arinze.