

A PROPHETIC WOMAN RELIGIOUS IN NIGERIA: MOTHER MARY CHARLES WALKER, RSC”

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Abstract

"Go you afar, teach all countries, and bear testimony to me until the end of time; I am with you" (Matthew 27:20). This is our Lord Jesus Christ's effective mandate, which led the missionaries to risk their lives and travel to strange and unfamiliar locations to proclaim the Word of God and convert people to Christ. Mother Mary Charles Walker, RSC, intuitively understood the prophecy and was driven to save souls in southern Nigeria, Africa. She came, conquered, and established the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus in Nigeria. Data were gathered from literature-based sources. Angela Margret was born in Brighton, England, on March 16, 1881, to Colonel Edward Walker, a British soldier, and Mary Josephine Woodhead. Her name was Margaret Mary Angela. She attended Holy Child School in Mayfield. She pursued a religious vocation and joined the Congregation of the Irish Sisters of Charity, later called the Religious Sisters of Charity. She professed her first vows in 1804 and her final vows in 2007. She graduated from a pedagogical institution as an experienced instructor. She worked in Dublin, Ireland. Her zeal for souls and the underprivileged led her to accept Bishop Shanahan CSSP's invitation to come to southern Nigeria for missionary evangelization. She landed at Calabar on October 3, 1923. She laboured tirelessly, created schools, health services and founded the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus in 1931. They were the first indigenous religious women's congregation in Nigeria. Her religious role model deserves to be emulated.

Keywords: Mother Charles Walker, Missionary, Southern Nigeria, Religious Congregation.

Introduction

“Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker's RSC's slogan, "The works of God must be done at all costs, no matter the inconveniences," was a driving force behind her desire to fulfil the holy mandate. Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker, RSC (1881–1966) was a young British Nun of the Religious Sisters of Charity who stood out among the missionaries. She followed divine inspiration and offered to embark on a missionary trip into a country in West Africa, namely in Nigeria, Calabar, which is located in the south-south region of Nigeria, at the request of a brilliant and vibrant missionary named Bishop Joseph Shanahan, CSSP.

Prior to her departure for the urgent mission in southern Nigeria, her mother general and council discussed her trip to Calabar, Nigeria. On October 3, 1923, she arrived in town and promptly began her quest to travel into the depths and save souls (Luke 5:4-6). Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker, RSC, responded with great passion to the yearnings of the vulnerable in the vicariate of Southern Nigeria, following a thorough

discussion with ecclesiastical authorities.

The scope of this writing enfolds some of the important latent information about the indefatigable saintly life of Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker, RSC, who responded to the call of Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSP for the education of girls in the southern part of Nigeria. The St. Joseph's Sisters, who had been there, were about to leave the school in Calabar to relocate to a French-speaking part of Cameroon. Mother Mary Charles Walker responded to the zeal for souls in Africa, and it motivated her absolute "abandonment of self" to save the children of God in Africa, especially in the southern part of Nigeria.

This was mandated by Spiritan missionary Joseph Shanahan Cssp, a fervent advocate for the conversion of God's children in Africa, particularly in southern Nigeria (Okure 2005 :90). When Sister Mary Charles Walker arrived in Calabar, Nigeria's Cross River State, things drastically changed. With great fervour, she entered the deep, changed St. Joseph's School, instituted the Montessori method of teaching, founded several vocational schools, and constructed seven cottages to house boys and girls from far-off locations. Her school received an A+ rating from the school inspectors due to its exceptional performance. She had such a wide range of abilities; in particular, she could train and direct masons, carpenters, bricklayers, tailors, and other tradespeople. She built dispensaries and clinics as well. Her primary concern was on women, especially girl-child education. She radically engaged in teaching catechisms and giving marriage instructions.

Four of her trained females agreed to join her and become like her. She promptly notified Bishop Shanahan and her superior general. She imprinted the vocation of religious life on their beings. She explained the three evangelical vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to them, as well as her prayer and community life as a nun. The founding of the four foundation members fulfilled one of her prophecies: "I had to pray fervently to God that if this effort is for Him and will continue after my death, He needs to inspire Nigerian ladies to the holy life."

On January 15, 1931, the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus was founded, and the first four members were hooded. Although Mother Mary Charles Walker left the Nigerian mission for ecclesiastical reasons, four foundation members, Mother St. John from Cameroon, Kathleen Bassey (also known as Mother Mary Ignatia) from Calabar in Cross River State, Agnes Ugoaru (also known as Mother Mary Aloysia) from Umuahia in Abia State, and Christiana Nwaturuocha (also known as Mother Mary Gertrude) from Mbaise in Imo State, received solid religious formation (Watutuocho 2012:89). The foundation members had an international vision. The Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus congregation now spans Nigeria's south, east, west, and north, as well as beyond. The congregation has four provinces: The South Eastern Province, the Central Eastern Province, the North Western Province, and the Ghana Province. There are Kenya Region, America Mission, United Kingdom Mission, and German Missions, each having provincial, regional, and mission leaders.

The Generalate is at Ifuho, Ikot Ekpene Diocese, Akwa Ibom State, whereas the Mother House is in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. Every Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus' Community reads Mother Mary Charles Walker's spiritual sayings at supper, shortly after meal prayer. Some examples include: "It is lonely without the Blessed Sacrament." "My desire has always been to create many convents of Native Sisters distributed around the country," and "personal private prayer will lead you." As she stated, "The work of God must be done at all times, no matter the inconveniences," religious women are encouraged to imitate Mother Mary Charles Walker RSC in her zeal for souls, love for the Blessed Sacrament, and devotion to Our Lady. This is the significance of the historical memorial honouring her life and missionary activities.

Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker, RSC

Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker was born on March 16, 1881, in Brighton, England. Margret Mary Angela was the fifth child and second daughter of Colonel Edward Walker and Josephine Woodhead (Okure 2016:7). She attended Brighton High School with her other brothers and sisters, but the girls were eventually transferred to Mayfield Parish School, which is run by the Society of Holy Child Jesus. When she finished school at Mayfield, her vocation to religious life became clear, and she opted to join the Irish Sisters of Charity in Dublin, Ireland. The congregation later became the Religious Sisters of Charity O'Leary 2009). The name 'Magdalene' was given to her at Calabar by the indigenes.' And a street is named after her Magdalene at Calabar.

Margret Mary Angela sought the opinion of her spiritual director, Rev. Fr. Galway, SJ, who advised her to join the Irish Sisters of Charity because of her commitment to serve God and humanity via missions. She was accepted by the Religious Sisters of Charity on May 19, 1902. In the same year, she obtained the congregational habit and changed her name to Sister Mary Charles Walker. She had a deep love for God and people. After two years of novitiate preparation in religious life, she professed her first vows in 1904 and her final vows in 1907.

She worked tirelessly for the Congregation of Religious Charity for 20 years. She attended pedagogy courses operated by the Society of Jesus in Ireland and graduated in 1912. She was a teacher and headmistress at schools in Ireland and Foxford. She taught Catechism and authored two books: *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*. and *Catechism Notes*, a reflection on ordinary Catechism. These publications served as effective evangelistic tools in Ireland, England, and Australia (Okure 2016:14).

Sr. Mary Charles Walker's specific vocation for mission was highlighted when Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSsp., a famous Spiritan Irish missionary in southern Nigeria, approached the sisters in Ireland for assistance in educating the women and converting souls to God. Sister Mary Charles Walker eagerly accepted Bishop Shanahan's offer to visit southern Nigeria, despite the possibility of mosquitoes and death in an uncivilised African area. Sister Mary Charles travelled on a three-week sea cruise aboard the SS Akabo, a vessel owned by the renowned Elder Dempster Company. Sister Mary Charles has left the port of Liverpool, England.

On October 3, 1923, she arrived at Calabar. The inhabitants of Calabar received her warmly, as did a group of missionary clerics and laypeople (Opara 2024: 21). She took over the St. Joseph School convent in Calabar and rebuilt it to meet standards. She worked tirelessly for ten years, establishing additional schools, clinics, and dispensaries. Her primary focus was on women, namely girl-child education. She was quite active in teaching catechisms and offering marital advice.

In 1931, she established the religious community of Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. She gave them a simple rule book modelled after the Religious Sisters of Charity and created the first religious uniform to outfit them. She instilled in them the fundamentals of religious life, including the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as community living. She eventually left the mission in Nigeria and gave over her missionary activities in southern Nigeria to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, then travelled to Bonjongo, Cameroon, to stay with Franciscan sisters and serve in their schools (Okure 1981: 65).

After leaving Nigeria, she returned to Calabar to encourage her daughters, who were postulants, to be focused on their religious vacations. She returned to England and assisted several Catholic priests in establishing schools in their communities. She also helped establish a standard school that was recognised by the Education Department and given up to the Notre Dame sisters to administer. She was under the authority of the Ecclesiastical Authority until the Second World War broke out and she became sick. Her sister-in-law took care of her and nursed her at home. Her brothers Charles and Henry built a residence for her on Mill Hill in Shoreham. She christened it St. Mary's Cottage and left it to the Sisters of Charity as a retreat when she died. She had regular communication with the Sisters of Charity. Mother Teresa Anthony invited her back to the congregation in 1955 and assigned her to a mission in Zambia. Sister Mary Charles Walker's experiences in Nigeria with the creation of indigenous religious sisters proved beneficial; she was tasked with instructing the new religious members of the Handmaids of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Due to the weakness of the body, Sister Mary Charles Walker devoted herself to producing altar bread as a means of multiplying Jesus for others to eat. She was very dedicated to duty, prayerful, and respectful in her community in Chikuni, Zambia, East Africa. She died peacefully on February 27, 1966. Her daughters the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus went to Chikuni in 1881 to exhume her remains at the Religious Sisters of Charity cemetery at Chikuni and brought it back to rebury her remains at the Handmaids of the Holy Child' Mother House at Calabar. This was conducted by Sister Mary Liguori Okure, HHCJ and late Sister Antoinette Mensa, HHCJ (Okure 2009:107).

Missionary Activities of Mother Mary Charles Walker RCS

Educational Values: When one-year-old Sister Mary Charles Walker RSC arrived in Calabar, Southern Nigeria, in 1924, she set out with zeal to reform the people's educational situation. Despite the Efik and Ibibio indigenous language obstacles, she remained committed to her mission of gaining souls for God and releasing people from ignorance and disease. She repaired the dissolved St. Joseph's convent school, overhauled its system, and educated staff to help her teach children and adults.

She went on to open more schools in various locations, including Ikot Ene, Anua, Ndon Ebom, Asong, Edem Ekpai, Ikot Ekpennyong, and Ifuho, with the goal of promoting literacy, providing vocational education opportunities, and implementing pedagogical approaches inspired by the Maria Montessori educational system. Her efforts encompassed these and a variety of other activities. She constructed eight residential buildings, often known as cottages, with the primary goal of accommodating people seeking temporary housing. She accepted the role of managing the establishment of educational institutions.

She embarked on dangerous excursions, crossing oceans and rivers to open schools and clinics in Anua and Ndon Ebom (Opara 2024:22). Okure claims that Sister Mary Charles Walker made literacy available to women in all cities and villages within the vicariate. It is important to note that Sister Mary Charles Walker was the first female missionary to establish a higher education institution, a pedagogy institution, to train teachers for both elementary and secondary schools in southern Nigeria. It was transferred from Calabar in Cross River State to Ifuho in Akwa Ibom State and developed into Holy Child Teacher Training College, Ifuho, and Ikot Ekpene. Vocational school was of great importance, which Sister Mary Charles Walker established to assist women and girls in developing skills in horticulture, domestic science, and crafts, including needlework, sewing, and raffia work.

Medical Services: Sister Mary Charles Walter implemented basic guidelines regarding child care, housekeeping, and medical hygiene. She opened dispensaries to promote healthy living in the several communities where schools were constructed. Ikot Ene and Anua evolved into clinics. Malaria and fever were typical conditions treated with medication.

Social Works: "The panacea for all discomfort resulting from self-consciousness or anxiousness is the recollection of God's presence." - "Nobody can do enough for God." "All our actions of charity and passion have as their ultimate goal the drawing of souls to God" (MMCMW). Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker cared for both the twins and their mothers. Because of their lack of knowledge, the indigenous people despised giving birth to twins. And so on. It is an abomination, and the people attempted to remove them from the land as divinely cursed. Mother Charles Walker rescued them and their moms, housed and fed them until they reached adulthood, and contributed to society. She taught them about human decency and helped put an end to these offensive practices in their communities. She cared for the orphans with her magnanimous style and provided them with a free education. She constructed twineries near the dispensary in Anua. She went door-to-door with her teachers to educate people and protect women from false allegations and public condemnations. They addressed her as "our sister."

Mother Mary Charles Mary Walker was an evangelist who taught catechism to infants and adults, preparing them for baptism, holy communion, and confirmation (Mbonu 2010:10). She emphasised the importance of moral training and religious discipline for children. She adequately prepared married couples by providing marital advice on how to maintain their marriage connections. Charles Walker emphasised that "to sustain a really

Christian home (Atta and Opara 2024:94), the church must rely on the children, particularly the girls, the prospective mothers of the next generation.”

This is a great challenge for all Christians in Africa, Europe, the United States of America, and the Eastern World. Okure added that in her evangelization, she meticulously followed the gospel teaching: Go and make disciples teach and baptise (1981:35). As a catechist, Sister Mary Charles baptized children and adults who were in danger of death. She maintained an ecumenical spirit through cordial friendships with other Christian denominations and worshippers of indigenous religions. She respected the culture of the Effiks and Ibibios in southern Nigeria. Culture is people's way of life (Opara 2024: 196).

Co-Workers: Sister Mary Charles Walker strongly believed in the strength of the indigenes to the extent that she made them co-workers in her apostolates. Otnko and Opara argue that Christians maintain the belief that, as a result of the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God, they were granted the capacity to exert dominion over the earth and were given the task of responsibly managing it from the very beginning of human existence (2023: 195). Mother Mary Charles Walker made use of both men and women in her missionary evangelism. She instructed the men on modern methods of building houses. They were taught carpentry, masons, bricklaying, furniture construction, and roofing. She was exceptionally gifted and adaptable to manual work. She instructed these labourers to help her build eight boarding cottages, the Prince of Peace Chapel, the convent's wooden-story building, and schools. The trained girls served as interpreters, teachers, and catechists for men and women seeking various forms of training.

Sister Mary Charles Walker sought resources through fund-raising, writing appeal letters to various agencies, and receiving money from relatives and friends. These funds were used to construct convents and a novitiate for the native sister she was planning to establish. It houses at least 800 boarders from all over who came to study with her.

The Prophecy: “My hope has always been to have many convents of Native Sisters scattered throughout the country.” The implication is that only a great visionary could see beyond their imaginations. Mother Mary Charles Walker lived an exemplary life for her followers to see and emulate. She was a woman of deep faith in God, trusted in divine providence, generous, magnanimous, self-respecting, and prayerful. Mother Mary Charles Walker made significant use of the books she produced while living in Ireland and southern Nigeria. Four girls want to be like her as a result of her commitment to the training of young females, which bore tremendous fruit.

She fostered their drive and encouraged them to behave honourably and conscientiously. So, Charles Walker will have another opportunity to show her admirable determination to dive down and establish a native religious community. Because she was a lady with the ability to see beyond, she was able to experience visions of Nigerian indigenous answering God's call to embrace religious life. More importantly, she imagined her native

congregation spreading throughout her own nation and beyond. As you can see, four of her trained female volunteers wanted to follow in her footsteps. She promptly notified Bishop Shanahan and her superior general. She imprinted the vocation of religious life on their beings. According to Waturuocha (2012:70) “she explained the three evangelical vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to them, as well as her prayer and community life as a nun”. Their readiness for this new life inspired her to hold a six-day retreat and create basic habits and a prayer manual for them in preparation for hooding, an entry into religious life. On January 15, 1931, she hooded them at Anua, Akwa Ibom State, and gave them a modest rule book, just like the postulants of the religious Sisters of Charity, her beloved order.

Mother Mary Charles Walker decided to extend an invitation to the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus through her close friend and classmate at Mayfield, Mother Mary Amadeus, SHCJ, who had now assumed the role of Superior of that religious order. They came to Calabar to investigate the possibility of functioning in southern Nigeria after responding promptly. When Mother Mary Charles Walker departed for Bojongo in Cameroon and England in 1934, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus came to Calabar and assumed her heavy workload.

She would have liked her congregation, the Religious Sisters of Charity, to come to Nigeria and labour, but they had not decided to come to the Nigerian Mission; however, they came later, after Mother Charles Walker had left the Nigerian Mission (Opara 2024: 41-42). On January 15, 1931, Mother Mary Charles Walker established the first native women's religious community in Anua. The witnesses were Rev. Fr. John Cross Anyogu, the vicariate's first Indigenous Igbo priest, ordained in 1930 from eastern Nigeria, and Mother Mary Amadeus, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, who had come for a visit. The four Foundation members were: Mother St. John, hailing from Cameroon; Kathleen Bassey, also known as Mother Mary Ignatia, hailing from Calabar in Cross River State; Agnes Ugoaru, also known as Mother Mary Aloysia, hailing from Umuahia in Abia State; and Christiana Nwaturuocha, also known as Mother Mary Gertrude, hailing from Mbaise in Imo State. The outlook of the foundation members was international.

Mother Mary Charles Walker spent three years directly cultivating this particular new indigenous religious group before leaving the Nigerian mission. Before she left, she had been there for three years. The Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus is thankful to have four pillars who also serve as the congregation's founding members, as well as a founding mother who is as noble, charming, and flawless as Mother Mary Charles Walker, RSC. She is foundress of the congregation. The vision that Mother Mary Charles Walker had of the future being fulfilled by the creation of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus and its remarkable capacity for perseverance is a fulfilment of the saint's prophecy. The first indigenous religious group in Nigeria to be recognised and granted rights by the Pope, Mother Mary Charles Walker, established the congregation in Nigeria, and it now has communities not just in Nigeria but also in other countries. Calabar, in the state of Cross River, is home to the mother house of the HHCIJ congregation. This is also the location where Mother Mary Charles Walker did the majority of her apostolate activity. Ifuho, which is located in Ikot Ekpene and is part of

Akwa Ibo The Pope has recognised and granted rights to the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, Nigeria's first female indigenous religious order. Mother Mary Charles Walker formed the congregation in Nigeria. It now has communities in other nations, including Nigeria. The HHCJ congregation's mother house is located in Calabar, Cross River State. This is also where Mother Mary Charles Walker conducted most of her apostolate operations. The generalate is located in Ifuho, Ikot Ekpene, in the Nigerian state of Akwa Ibom. The congregation has expanded to include four provinces, which are as follows: the South-South Province, with its headquarters in Calabar; the South Eastern Province, with its headquarters in Onitsha; the North Western Province, with its headquarters in Lagos; and the Ghana Province, with its headquarters in Accra. The congregation is split into two regions: one in Kenya and one in the United States, where it operates a mission. London, Germany, Canada, Italy, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Cameroon are among the other places in the world where the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus are actively carrying out their missionary works. The Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus are involved in apostolates pertaining to education at all levels, including the fields of medicine, social work, and the spiritual life (Opara 2024:45). Now the number of the professed sisters are scattered all over Nigeria and other Countries. There are numerous different congregations' female religious all over Nigeria.

Significance of the Study: Mother Mary Charles Walker's life and missionary activities ought to be remembered in world society. She is a heroine; her efforts will not be in vain. Her life reflects being an ardent Christian, a devout religious, and a supporter of missionary activities. She was motivated; she desired to win souls for Christ in African society; she came and conquered. She had set a good example for the women nuns to follow in terms of obedience to ecclesiastical authority, trust in divine Providence, deep faith, prayerfulness, humility, charity, and simplicity.

Her religious life teaches every Christian to be dedicated and committed to their various duties. Her religious life encourages women to be patient and loyal in their assigned apostolate. Above all, the love of God is ultimate, and the love of one's neighbours as oneself is the goal of the missionary spirit.

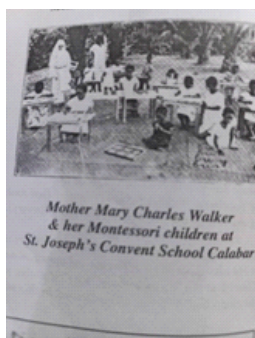
Conclusion

The history of the great missionaries remains indelible in our hearts, especially that of Mother Mary Charles Walker, RSC, 1886–1966, aged 85 years. She came to Southern Nigeria as a nun of the Religious Sisters of Charity in 1923 under the directives of Bishop Joseph Shanahan, CSsp., the then Prefecture of the Vicariate. She worked assiduously for the indigenes; they called her 'Our Sister'. A name that represented closeness, tolerance, and mutual understanding. As she began her missionary activity, plunging into the deep to convert souls to Christianity through teaching methods and founding formal and vocational schools and dispensaries, she was dubbed the 'Nun of Calabar' due to her devout habit. She formed the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, Nigeria and West Africa's first indigenous female religious group. Members of the congregation must remember to repeat her maxims on a regular basis and refer to her as Mother Foundress.

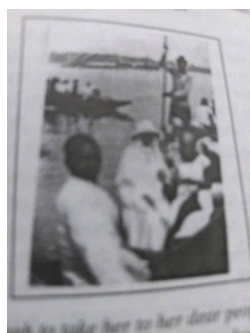
Some of her saintly maxims include:

1. Every step of my life God has led and I have followed.
2. Make every action a prayer.
3. Your life and action all through the day should reflect God's presence in you.
4. Only prayers can win the favours I want.
5. If we wish to learn to live with Jesus and at the same time to work for Jesus, His Mother must be our model and our guide.
6. Close union and constant recourse to our Lord will help you
7. I am more than ever convinced that we must lead altogether supernatural lives if we really want to make true Christians of the women and girls
8. To desire only to please God, to fear only to disappoint Him, means perfect peace
9. Only the best is good enough for God no matter the inconveniences
10. God knows all the needs of His Children in Africa and he loves them infinitely more than I do
11. Be docile to thine Unseen Guide, Love Him as he loves thee: time and obedience are enough and thou a Saint shall be
12. No man ever guarded and cherished and cared for the woman he loved, as he will cherish and watch over you if you live only for Him and abandon yourself with perfect trust to His care
13. God works in a special way through those consecrated and united to Him.

Pictorial evidence of the dynamic indefectible missionary: Mother Mary Charles Walker, RSC. The foundress of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, HHCIJ



Montessori class at Calabar



MMCW in a boat to Anua and other places across the river.



First Chapel At Calabar, 1926



Mother Mary Charles Walker RSC



first convent at Calabar 1925



and The Four Foundation Members 1931



The Current Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, HHCIJ.



Logo



One of the 8 cottages 1924

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