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Society of African Missions
American Province

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Commemorating 150th Anniversary of Death of S.M.A. Founder

S.M.A. Today—Abundant Harvest

S.M.A. Founder Msgr. Melchior de Marion Brésillac passed away 150 years ago on June 25, 1859. Read the insert in this special anniversary issue about Msgr. Brésillac's heroic life and vision.

An S.M.A. author notes: *In imitation of his Master, Bishop Brésillac had drunk the cup of suffering to the dregs. His final words [“Faith, Hope, Charity”], however, gave the supreme testimony to a vision of life that sees death not as the end of hope but as the seedbed of a new creation. Today, we know that the sacrifice of our Founder and his companions was truly life-giving—a sacrifice that has borne abundant fruit for the evangelization of Africa. As he died, Bishop Brésillac could only hang on to the promise of Christ with faith, unquenchable hope and total, self-surrendering love. (From Continuing the Adventure.)*

Even though all of the first missionaries to Africa died or departed within a few weeks, the Society miraculously recovered. Over the decades, thousands of S.M.A.'s have served. In 2009, 150 years later, the Society of African



Above: Map of Africa. The countries where S.M.A. Missionaries are serving currently are numbered and named. Green marks the countries where the S.M.A. Missionaries of the American Province are currently serving.

Below: S.M.A. Missionaries from many countries gather for Mass commemorating S.M.A.'s 100 years service in Liberia in October 2006.



Missions (S.M.A.) has grown and continues to respond to the needs of mission in Africa today. By 2008, S.M.A. had 805 Priests, 12 Brothers, 13 Deacons, 146 Seminarians, 5 Associate Priests and 39 Lay Associates. S.M.A. Missionaries are serving in 16 countries in Africa (*see Map at left*).

New Developments in S.M.A.

S.M.A. missionaries come from around the world to serve in Africa. Many of the new, young S.M.A. Missionary priests come from the countries of Africa itself, as well as from India, the Philippines, and Poland. They bring great zeal, life, and energy to S.M.A. The traditional Provinces in Europe and America have fewer new vocations, but contribute financial help and guidance from their long experience. Service to the Church in Africa is the focus of S.M.A.'s existence. In the spirit of the Founder, S.M.A. invites young people to consider a wholehearted, unconditional offer of one's life—following Jesus, living the Gospel and serving in the missions in Africa.

Our aim is to be an effective response to the missionary vocation of the Church, chiefly among Africans and people of African origin.

S.M.A. Jubilarians



**Fr. John Feeney, S.M.A.
60th**

**Fr. James Perrone, S.M.A.
50th**

On February 10, 2009, **Fr. John Feeney, S.M.A.** celebrated the 60th Anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. Fr. Brendan Darcy, S.M.A. represented the American Province at his celebration in Ireland. Fr. John was surrounded by family and friends as he reached this milestone in his missionary life.

Fr. Feeney ministered for over forty years in the missions in Liberia. He served on the Provincial Council and as the S.M.A. Regional Superior in Liberia for many years. Currently he resides in County Galway in Ireland and in his own words *“has gone home to enjoy poor health.”*

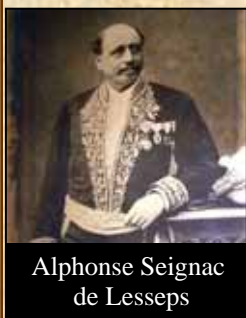
For **Fr. Jim Perrone, S.M.A.**, February 7, 2009 marked the 50th Anniversary of his priestly ordination. Originally from Connecticut, Fr. Jim went on his first mission assignment in 1960 to Grand Cess, Liberia. He loved his mission work. After eight years, due to health problems, he returned to the U.S. and served for 18 years at S.M.A.’s African-American Parish in Los Angeles, St. Odilia’s. After St. Odilia, Fr. Jim served in Retreat ministry. Fr. Jim is an accomplished jazz musician. Having dealt with some extraordinary health challenges in the past years, while still residing in Washington State, Fr. Jim *“makes the most of every day. Every day is a gift from God,”* he says. **Congratulations to Fr. John and Fr. Jim!**

S.M.A. Philippines District-in-Formation

Right: Map of Philippines
The photos below were taken of the **Teaching of Mothers and Feeding Programs at Good Shepherd Parish in Manila,**



A SPECIAL CONNECTION TO THE LAST DAYS OF THE S.M.A. FOUNDER



Alphonse Seignac
de Lesseps

S.M.A. Founder Msgr. Melchior de Marion Brésillac, in his last days in June 1859, was cared for by the **French Consul to Sierra Leone, Alphonse Seignac de Lesseps**, who took him into his own home in Freetown. He was present when Msgr. Brésillac died. Later he erected a monument over the graves of the Founder and his companions. De Lesseps is a third cousin of **Catherine Hicks (née de Lesseps)**, the mother of longtime S.M.A. Lay Missionary **Theresa Hicks**.



Theresa and Mother

Philippines District-in-Formation *Fr. Gus O'Driscoll, S.M.A.*

The SMA journey to South-East Asia began in September 1985 when two priests of the Irish Province, **Fr. John McCormack, S.M.A.** and **Fr. Pat Kelly, S.M.A.** arrived in the Philippines. Eight months later, the **Parish of the Good Shepherd** in the huge metropolis of **Manila** was established. By early 1989 the parish church and house were completed.

Recruitment and formation of students, the primary focus of S.M.A. presence in the country, took off in 1987 with the purchase and development of a house and lot in **New Manila** in the northern part of the city. The students today continue to take their studies in philosophy and theology in nearby missionary institutes.

The third phase of the SMA project in the Philippines came to fruition when the **International Spiritual Year Center** in **Silang** was opened in February 1992. In spacious grounds and in the midst of fruit trees and plants, our Filipino and Indian students come together to deepen their life of prayer, to grow in knowledge of self and to discover more about the Society.

The S.M.A. presence in the country has encouraged the local church to develop a greater missionary consciousness. At present, five members of the Philippines District-in-Formation work in areas of primary evangelization in **Ghana** and **Tanzania**. Four more members are assigned on the home-front, engaged in administration, recruitment/formation and pastoral work.

As the Philippines is the only predominantly Catholic country in Asia, it is seen by many religious



Above: Filipino, Indian and Irish S.M.A. priests and students in Manila. **Fr. Augustine O'Driscoll, S.M.A.** (writer of this article) is on the far left.



Left: S.M.A. Spiritual Year Community at Silang, Biluso, Cavite Province, Philippines for 2005 - 2006.

Bottom Left: Ordination of **Fr. Raul Estalane, S.M.A.** (Center, First Row) May 2006, with S.M.A. priests of the Philippines District-in-Formation. Fr. Raul is serving in Tanzania.



congregations as fertile ground for vocations. Hence we are “competing” with many institutes and societies like ourselves, searching for candidates to the missionary priesthood. And the numbers are fewer than in the past. A second significant challenge facing our Unit is the move towards financial self-sufficiency. The establishment of groups of local Mission Partners is a help in this regard.

The Church in the Philippines is very vibrant, with the laity fully involved in so many ministries and functions. It instills a great sense of hope and joy.

Fr. O'Driscoll, of the Irish Province, is Councilor of the Philippines D.I.F.

Ordination at S.M.A.

S.M.A. American Province happily announces the Priestly Ordination of **Fr. Eliecer Sandoval, S.M.A.** on May 23, 2009. The Ordination was performed by **Bishop John Dooher, Auxiliary Bishop** of the Archdiocese of Boston, in St. Anthony Chapel at S.M.A. Headquarters in Tenafly, NJ.

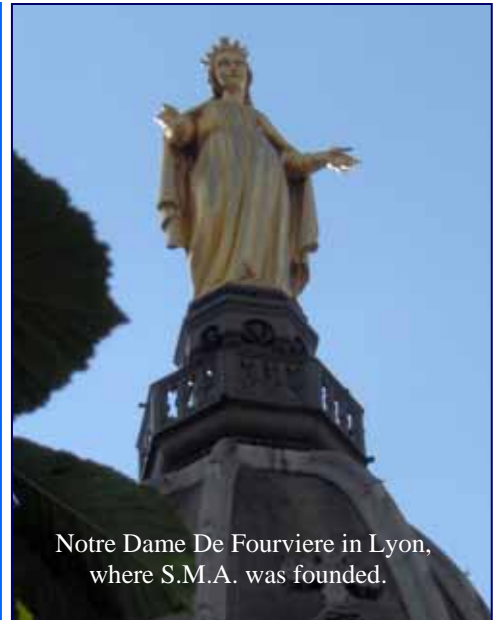
Fr. Eliecer began his missionary journey as an **S.M.A. Lay Missionary**. In 2001, he served in Cape Palmas Diocese in **Liberia**, working with the Development Office. In 2003 he served in the **Hope for Life Project** in Accra, **Ghana**.

Answering God's call to the priesthood, he applied and was accepted. He entered the S.M.A. seminary in 2004. Congratulations, Fr. Eliecer!

Pray for Fr. Eliecer as he continues his



Above: **New S.M.A. priest, Fr. Eliecer Sandoval, S.M.A.**



Notre Dame De Fourviere in Lyon, where S.M.A. was founded.

Please join with the S.M.A. Family in this Prayer for the Canonization of Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac:

Lord God, you called Melchior de Marion Brésillac to serve you. To make you known and loved you sent him to India and then to Africa. For you, he gave everything, even his very life. So that his life and teaching may inspire a missionary commitment in Christians today, we trust that the Church will recognize the holiness of this great servant of mission and that, by his intercession, we will receive the graces of which we have need. (In particular) We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Are you interested in learning more about S.M.A.? The need in the missions is great! Food, clothing and shelter are needed but more than that, people need to experience God's healing love and learn about Him through Jesus' teachings. Often, they experience God's love when someone reaches out to them in their suffering, loneliness and poverty. Your witness and wholehearted giving of your life for the sake of the Gospel, is something only you can do. Come and see if S.M.A. is the right group for you.

S.M.A. Vocation Team



Final Days of Msgr. Brésillac On June 18, 1859, a week before Msgr. Brésillac's death, he wrote: "May God's holy name be blessed! His ways are impenetrable; let us adore them and submit. I trust that the bitter anguish caused by the calamities he has sent us will not offend him, provided we bear it without murmuring. **I can say that our sorrow is beyond measure.**" On June 25th, the fever made rapid progress. Fr. Bremond wrote: "In a tone of voice I will never forget, Msgr. Brésillac raised his eyes to Heaven and said 'Faith, Hope and Ch--.' 'Charity,' I said. 'Thank you,' he replied very feebly." At 1:20 p.m., after half an hour of terrible agony, Msgr. Brésillac, in profound peace, passed to his eternal reward. He was 46.

Msgr. Brésillac's Tomb in Lyon



S. Exc. Mgr de Marion-Brésillac
Fondateur de la Société des
Missions Africaines de Lyon
1813-1859



Society of African Missions

The Life and Vision of S.M.A. Founder

Msgr. Melchior de Marion Brésillac

1813–1859



Above: Photo of Castelnaudary, France, where Melchior de Marion Brésillac was born and grew up.



Above: Castelnaudary. The spire of St. Michel Church is visible for miles.
Left: Msgr. Melchior de Marion Brésillac.

Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac founded the Society of African Missions in France in 1856, not long before he and four companions died on their first mission effort in Sierra Leone in 1859. The following is a brief account of his life and work:

Melchior de Marion Brésillac was born on December 2, 1813 in Castelnaudary, in the South of France. He was the eldest of five children born into a Christian, noble French family. They had been tested by the French Revolution and had fallen on hard times. He was home-taught by his father, until he went to the Minor Seminary in 1832 to complete his secondary education.

In December 1838 he was ordained and appointed **Pastor in the Parish of Saint-Michel in Castelnaudary**, the town of his birth. He served there less than three years. After clearly discerning his vocation, he decided to consecrate himself totally to the mission *ad gentes* (“to non-Christian peoples”). In order to achieve this, he had to overcome the opposition of his bishop (who eventually gave his agreement), but the opposition of his father was so strong that Melchior left for the Seminary of the **Paris Foreign Mission Society** without saying goodbye

to his family. He remained there for nine months. He was then appointed to **Pondicherry (Bangalore) in India**. At the age of 29, he was on his way to his first mission assignment. He arrived in Pondicherry on July 24, 1842. He expressed his joy: “It is no longer a mere plan, O my God. Soon I shall be a missionary.”

Mission in India

Melchior had looked forward with eager anticipation to working on the missions. However, his romantic vision of mission was quickly dissolved by the harsh reality he faced. He had been prepared for hardship and suffering for Christ and was even



Left: **St. Michel Parish** in Castelnaudary, France, where Msgr. Brésillac served as Pastor.

Right: Msgr. Brésillac served as Rector for the **Pondicherry Seminary, India.**





St. Michael's Cathedral, Coimbatore

looking forward to it. But the problems he met were entirely different—the internal suffering proved more acute than any physical pain. During the twelve years he spent in India, he worked diligently, enjoying the work and the people among whom he labored. After only two years he was appointed Seminary Rector, and two years later, in 1846, as first **Bishop of Coimbatore**—although he felt he was too young and inexperienced in mission for either position.

Msgr. Brésillac desired to train Indian priests; he wished to establish an indigenous clergy, with their own hierarchy, capable of taking on responsibility for the missions, with



Above: **Msgr. Brésillac, Bishop of Coimbatore.**

Europeans acting only as assistants.

Caste and Rites

He did enjoy the seminary post, for he strongly believed that the formation of a local clergy should be one of the major objectives of mission.

He had considerable success in upgrading the seminary. As Bishop, however, he ran into a host of problems and disputes, most relating to the Indian caste system and to liturgical rites. These issues had long been matters of discussion and repeated appeals to and responses from Rome had only muddled the situation.

He had also strongly criticized his own Paris Foreign Mission Society, convinced that it had strayed far from its original spirit of zeal, and this caused considerable difficulty in his rapport with his own missionaries. As a priest, he had felt uneasy about the situation, but he could soothe his conscience by saying that decision-making was the responsibility of those in authority; his responsibility was to obey. Now, as Bishop, he was the one responsible, and his sensitive conscience made it agony for him. He craved clarity; and the situation in India was utterly confused and divisive. After agonizing over it for a long time, he submitted his resignation—at first in the hope that such a drastic step would force both his Society and Rome to take action. When there was no response, he decided that resignation was imperative. After repeated denials, Rome eventually agreed to hear his case in person. He went there in 1854. A year later, his resignation was finally accepted.

A New Mission

Almost from the day his resignation was accepted, he began to look around for a new mission. Gradually his thoughts and energies focused on Africa, especially “*the most abandoned places*” there. At first Rome threw cold water on the idea and advised him to slow down. But he persisted. He began to accumulate information on Africa, zeroing in on Dahomey, whose people he believed to be in need of the saving love of Christ, and where there were then no missionaries. In January 1856, he presented his proposal to Rome, complete with maps and documentation. The proposal was examined and approved in principle.

His good friend, Cardinal Barnabo, strongly urged that, for the continuity of the work, it would be better to form a new Society specifically for that purpose. Brésillac was overjoyed at this providential turn of events. He proclaimed a conviction that all his previous life and work had been, in God’s Providence, a “time of novitiate” in preparation for the new venture. He could draw upon his own mission experience and the experience of the Paris Foreign Mission Society in preparing for his own Africa Mission Society—adopting those things he believed were positive, and avoiding those he believed negative.

Sharing His Vision

With characteristic energy and enthusiasm, he set about preparing for his new venture. Within a few months, he had drawn up “Fundamental Articles” which would serve as a provisional Constitution. The first of these stated the principal aim of the new Society: “To evangelize the countries of Africa which are in most need of missionaries.”

He now began the arduous task of seeking personnel and funding for the new Society-to-be. He traveled the length and breadth of France again and again, searching, begging, imploring for men and funds, preaching in Church after Church, wherever he could get a hearing. Meanwhile he bought a house in Lyon, France for expected candidates. Slowly, responses came, and by the end of October, he and the first candidate were settled into their new home.

The following week, Providence seemed to smile on this venture with the arrival of **Fr. Augustine Planque**, who had for many years been a seminary professor. Brésillac saw him as the ideal man who could take charge of the seminary and handle Society affairs while he continued the search for men and funds. The two were utterly different in temperament—Brésillac, the romantic enthusiast and visionary, full of zest and restless energy, impetuous to a fault; Planque, somber and pragmatic, a man of courage and tenacity, somewhat autocratic—yet his letters to his missionaries show a man of great concern. Despite their differences in temperament, the two hit it off very well from the start and a deep friendship and mutual



Above: **Fr. Augustine Planque, S.M.A.** (1826–1907).

respect developed between them. While Brésillac was on tour, letters poured from his pen to Planque, encouraging, advising, inquiring about the new candidates, sharing with him his vision and dreams for the new Society.

Foundation Date

Father Louis Reymond arrived next and soon the house “began to take the shape of a community.” Community life and mutual support and affection were highly prized by Brésillac. By December 1856, there were three priests and four seminarians, and on December 8th, Brésillac led the little nucleus of the new Society to the shrine of **Notre Dame de Fourviere in Lyon**. There, each priest made his life commitment to the work of the African Missions, promising to accept “the pains and privations, the hardships of the climate, the suffering of



Above: Plaque in the shrine of **Notre Dame de Fourviere**.

persecution and even martyrdom, should God deem me worthy to bear witness to the faith by my death.” A few days later, Msgr. Brésillac wrote to Rome that the **Society of African Missions** was no longer a mere project; it existed.

December 8, 1856, was to be the official foundation date of the new Society.

Fundraising

While the group at Lyon settled into their routine of prayer and community life, Brésillac continued his tours. Of great help to him in this were two volunteers he met during one of his early appeals, Father Papetard and Madame Blanchet. The latter formed a group of lady associates who were to be of considerable help in the fundraising, while she and her family were a source of friendship, sympathy and encouragement to him during his remaining years. Fr. Papetard had a great gift for fundraising, traveling to Germany, Holland and Belgium and returning with very substantial amounts. He became an associate member of S.M.A. and for the rest of his life, he became the chief fundraiser. He lifted a big burden from the shoulders of Brésillac who could now devote himself more fully to other aspects of his work.

The Mission Assignment

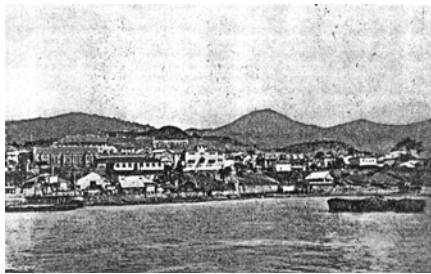
From the day the Society officially came into existence, Brésillac redoubled his efforts to prepare for mission, badgering Rome for a definite mission assignment. Finally, in late 1857, word did come. The mission assigned to S.M.A. would be **Sierra Leone** (also including **Liberia**

and **Guinea**), not Dahomey on which he had set his heart. Disappointed though he was, his assent was unconditional: “I immediately shared [the news] with my associates. And I am glad to tell you that, unanimously, they got the spirit which will, I hope, always animate our Society, by instantly letting go of the desire we had of starting our work in Dahomey, in order to go along with the views of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda.”

Without delay, preparations for the new mission began: amassing information about the country, contacting government and shipping agencies, collecting necessities for the journey. **In November 1858**, the first three were on their way to Sierra Leone: **Fathers Reymond and Bresson and Brother Eugene**. Once they had departed, Brésillac began preparations for the next departures, this time including himself. From Freetown, the first letter painted a very positive picture: The country was far more beautiful than they expected, the people were friendly, and food was plentiful. Most surprising of all, and reassuring: “Taking due precautions for health, one has little to fear from the climate.” This was encouraging news to Brésillac and his companions, **Father Riocreux and Brother Gratien**, as they set out on their journey, **March 11, 1859**. How mistaken they were.

A Double Plague

By the time they arrived on **May 14**, the situation in Freetown had changed. Soon after Father Reymond’s optimistic letter, a double plague of smallpox and yellow fever struck. The death toll was appalling. Brésillac and his companions arrived in a town where “Europeans are dying like flies.”



Above: Scenes from Freetown, Sierra Leone. Left: Map shows the Founder’s journey.



On May 26th, two weeks after his arrival, Father Riocreux was down with fever, rallied slightly, then was carried away on June 2nd—the first of the group to go to his eternal reward. Three days later, Father Bresson joined him in death. A stricken Bishop wrote to Father Vian on June 10th, “In the space of three days, I lost two of my confreres . . . It is impossible to give you an idea of the effect on my soul of this double tragedy... It is not improbable that Father Reymond and I will follow those we mourn, and the mission of Sierra Leone will have finished as soon as it began.” And so it happened. Succumbing to the ravages of yellow fever, **Msgr. Brésillac passed away on June 25, 1859**. His final words were “Faith, Hope and Charity.” By the end of June, five of the new

missionaries were dead and the remaining one had returned to France.

The Vision Lives

It was on the strong, steady shoulders of Augustine Planque that the blow of Freetown’s tragedy fell and the future of the Society was placed. In Brésillac’s last letter to Planque before leaving for Sierra Leone, he wrote: “If the sea and the rocks were to make this year my last, you would be there to see that the work did not get shipwrecked.” From their years together and extensive correspondence, he understood well the **spirit which Brésillac wished to develop in the Society:** *Total and wholehearted dedication to mission, especially to the most abandoned people in Africa; willingness to bear hardship, suffering and death if necessary for the spread of the Gospel; readiness to move on to new fields once the Church is established; wholehearted work for the formation of local clergy; respect and love for each other in a spirit of community; loving the people of Africa with a real love, a “love of affection;” ever dedicated to seeking and doing God’s will with joy, zeal and courage; ever turning to God in prayer, as Father and friend; and doing all in full loyalty to the Church and Holy See.*

Brésillac had expressed his full confidence that Planque would carry on the work in fidelity to his own vision. As Superior General of the Society for the next 50 years, Planque faithfully and zealously fulfilled that mandate.

After a few years, a steady flow of S.M.A. missionaries began arriving again on the coast of Africa.