

Dublin Airport aircraft blessing: New chaplain continues 77-year Irish Catholic custom.

By Patrick J. Passmore

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Dublin Airport's tradition of blessing aircraft entered a new chapter in 2024 with the appointment of a Nigerian-born priest as chaplain, ensuring the continuation of a custom that dates back 77 years.

The ceremony, which was moved from its traditional Christmas Day timing to earlier in December this year, maintains its role as a significant moment in the airport's calendar. The arrival of Father Justin Obijuru made this possible after a six-month vacancy following the departure of longtime chaplain Father Des Doyle.

"I'm quite excited to take up this particular role as chaplain," said Obijuru, who is currently pursuing a master's degree at Maynooth Pontifical University.

"When the appointment came, I was really happy; it gave me a sense of belonging."

Earlier concerns about new aviation security protocols threatening the ceremony's future were resolved in April when the Dublin Airport Authority (DAA) confirmed its continuation. The DAA emphasized the inclusive nature of this year's ceremony by inviting representatives from various faiths.

Doyle, who served as chaplain for 16 years, recalled conducting the blessings each year after the final Christmas Mass.

"It always had a tremendous positive reaction," he said. He noted how the ceremony has adapted to reflect changes in modern Irish society while maintaining its core purpose.

The blessing's rich history is documented in Ireland's national archives.

RTÉ, the national broadcaster, preserves notable footage from May 1967 showing a guard of honour formed by Aer Lingus flight and ground crews lining the tarmac. The silent newsreel captures the local parish priest, Father Daniel Barrett, performing the blessing alongside Father John Fenelon, the airport chaplain. A choir appears, singing as a litany

of Irish saints is recited. The depicted May ceremony would be the last of its kind, as the blessing would move to Christmas Day later that year.

The Irish Film Institute's archives include additional historical documentation, notably a 1962 Radharc Series documentary about Catholic saints and the Aer Lingus fleet.

Obijuru's appointment and the ceremony's adaptation to current airport operations demonstrate the continued evolution of this distinctive Dublin Airport tradition, which began in 1947 with the blessing of a single Aer Lingus aircraft.

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