The Jesuits in Africa

The Jesuit missions to Africa were concentrated in five different areas: Ethiopia, Egypt, the area of the Zambezi River, Angola and Cape Verde. But in contrast to the numbers who went to the New World and Asia, Africa received but a mite of the Jesuit manpower.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Angola was the main mission and the most durable. Through the munificence of benefactors, the Jesuits built a splendid church and an imposing college in Luanda, a city founded by the Portuguese. There, the Jesuits divided their forces between teaching grammar and literature and catechizing native tribes. Baltasar Barretra, S.J., [1538-1612] was particularly notable in this mission. His voluminous correspondence over 32 years provides valuable source material on Angola’s early history. In 1604-08, the enterprising Fr. Barretra, with the aid of local chieftains, set up mission stations in the Cape Verde Islands, at Cape Verde, in Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

The impediments to success in African missionary lands were many and insuperable. War and slavery were two especially vexing problems, to say little of the debilitating climate of lands just fifteen degrees above the equator, and the crippling sicknesses which so inhibited the Jesuits and sent many of them to early graves. Jesuit links to colonial governments—with the French on Madagascar as well as with the British, the Boers, and the Portuguese in Southern Africa—were never understood by the Africans and thus were always suspect.

A bewildering aspect of the behavior of the Jesuits on the Zambezi in the late 19th century is their apparent naivete about health hazards. Letters and reports indicate that they took hardly any precautions against fever or other illnesses. The Jesuits would certainly have known that quinine was the appropriate prophylactic to combat malaria, but their letters reveal that they rarely used quinine known that quinine was the appropriate prophylactic to combat malaria, but their letters reveal that they rarely used quinine. This is all the more suspect.

Engelbert Mveng, S.J. (1930-95), one of the first promoters of African liberation theology, is considered by many to be the “father of the church” in Africa. This prophetic Jesuit voice at the heart of African theological research was assassinated in his home near Yaoundé in 1995. Throughout his life, Mveng fought for the dignity of African people who had suffered so much through slavery and colonization. The multi-talented Mveng—historian, poet, artist, philosopher, and theologian—served as the founding general secretary of AOTA (Ecumenical Association of African Theologians) and directed the department of history at the University of Yaoundé for many years.

The Twentieth Century

By and large, the African missions of the restored Society struck deeper roots than those of the old, but it remained for their followers in the 20th century to alter this discouraging record by the foundation of some of the most vigorous bodies of the modern African Church.

In various places in Africa what had been the mission of one or another group of Europeans. The Jesuits in the former Portuguese province made up mostly of African Jesuits. Zimbabwe is one example; Zambia is another. At the same time, international collaboration among Jesuits provides support and staff for organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service and theologian—served as the founding general secretary of AOTA (Ecumenical Association of African Theologians) and directed the department of history at the University of Yaoundé for many years.

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In the area mapped by an unknown geographer in a Ptolomy of 1564, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and, hypothetically, Abyssinian ships fell in the geographical blanks. Apart from a large city in Cameroon and a city in Angola evangelized by the Portuguese Jesuits, there is only the course of a labyrinthine Nile originating from a constellation of lakes and pools.

In the 18th century, the great English lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, translated it from French to English and published it as A Voyage to Abyssinia (1735). Johnson’s more dramatic version, The History of Raselas, Prince of Abyssinia (1759), takes its name from that of the Prince, Ras Stella, of Fr. Lobos’s narrative.

The Scottish explorer, James Bruce (1730-94), explored the area around Lake Tana over 150 years later, and in November 1770 went to the spring from which the Blue Nile rises. He mistakenly believed that the Blue Nile was of greater historical importance than the White Nile, held that he was the first European to have discovered its source and publicly denounced Fr. Paez’s travels up the Blue Nile as a fabrication. Upon his return to Europe, James Bruce was mocked to find that, while he was still in Egypt, J. B. D’Anville, cartographer to Louis XV of France, had (in 1772) issued a new edition of his map of Africa in which, by a careful study of the writings of Paez and Lobos, he had anticipated Bruce’s discoveries. D’Anville’s map is singularly accurate. To Bruce, nevertheless, belongs the honor of being the first European to trace the Blue Nile to its confluence with the White Nile.

Jesuit Missionaries Identify the Source of the Blue Nile

“On the 21st of April 1619, I found myself there with the [Abyssinian] sovereign and all his army, climbed a hill and looked down with great attention. I saw two round springs, each of a diameter of about four palms, and I admired with immense joy that which neither Cyrus, King of Persia, Cambrie, nor Alexander the Great and not even the famous Julius Caesar ever saw.”

— Pedro Paez, S.J. (1564-1622), Spanish Jesuit missionary who departed for Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in 1589 but was captured by pirates and spent the next 14 years as a galley slave. When released in 1603 he continued on his way to convert the Emperor of Abyssinia and his people.

Fr. Paez was by any measure an extraordinary man. Priest, physician, architect, and explorer, he quickly won the confidence of the Ethiopian Negus (Emperor Susseynos), built the royal palace at Gonder and taught catechism to members of the royal family. But widespread rebellion against the Negus Susseynos followed the announcement of his intention to unite the Abyssinian church to Rome. Having seen the fruit of almost 20 years of soil in the remarkable conversion of the Negus, Paez died in May 1622. Disaster followed his passing.

The man Pope Urban VIII sent as patriarch lacked the flexibility, historical perspective, and cultural breadth to appreciate the liturgical traditions of the Abyssinian Church. In 1632, the Negus, died professing himself a Roman Catholic, but with him passed the hopes of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia, for the new Negus, Basildore, forbade contact with the priests of Rome.

Some of the most interesting stories of the customs and traditions of Ethiopia in this period come to us from Fr. Paez and from a Portuguese Jesuit, Jerome Lobos, who visited ten years later. Lobos also traveled to the sources of the Nile and left a vivid description in his book of the rise of the river and its passage through Lake Tana. Some time later, the book was translated from Portuguese to French. In the 16th century, the great English lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, translated it from French to English and published it as A Voyage to Abyssinia (1735). Johnson’s more dramatic version, The History of Raselas, Prince of Abyssinia (1759), takes its name from that of the Prince, Ras Stella, of Fr. Lobos’s narrative.

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