

28. Early Catholic Missionary Efforts

THE CRUSADES

The Roman Catholic church made several attempts to free parts of North Africa, as well as the Holy Land, from the grip of Islam. In 1202 the Fourth Crusade was launched against Egypt under Innocent III. In 1212 the Children's Crusade attempted to take the Holy Land. Over 20,000 children took part. Unfortunately, many of them ended up as slaves of Islamic rulers in Egypt.

FRANCIS OF ASSISI

In 1219 Franciscan friars were sent to North Africa. It was an age of great papal power and inquisition against the Albigenses, who might be considered proto-protestants. Francis of Assisi himself crossed the Crusader-Muslim lines and preached before Sultan Al Kamil of Egypt.

RAYMOND LULL

In 1315 Raymond Lull, a Franciscan theologian, sailed alone for Carthage, having failed in his attempt to interest the Pope and the priests of his day in the evangelization of the Muslims of North Africa. A scholar converted later in life, Lull's passion was to evangelize the Muslims of North Africa. He knew the Berber language Catalan and Arabic, and debated with Islamic teachers for years, gathering a small band of believers. He advocated a program of informed preaching, plus military force against the Muslims. Lull was expelled from Tunis, but several years later went secretly to Bougia, an area to the west of Tunis. There he witnessed quietly for a year and again gathered a small band of believers, but he was stoned to death when he began to speak out publicly against Islam in 1315. He was 79 years old.

PRINCE HENRY

In 1415 Prince Henry (Dom Henrique) of Portugal (1394-1460) attacked and won over Ceuta in North Africa, which had previously been an Islamic stronghold. This gave Europe its first permanent possession in Africa for more than 700 years and exposed the prince to the tales told by the Arab traders of great black kingdoms to the south.

SENEGAL

The first Christians were converted to Catholicism by Portuguese explorers in 1445. In 1489, the Senegalese chief was baptized.

GUINEA-BISSEAU

Portuguese explorers were also responsible for the conversion of the first natives of Guinea-Bissau to Catholicism in 1445. In 1462 Catholic missionaries entered the country.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

The first converts to Catholicism were made by Portuguese traders in 1445. The land remains predominantly Catholic to this day.

KINGDOM OF KONGO

The Catholic church made its first inroads in Kongo in 1492 with the appearance of the first Portuguese explorers. The Roman Catholic church began to gain a hold in the Kingdom of Kongo in 1491 with the conversion of the Mani-Kongo. He had agreed to baptism after a church was built in which to celebrate the baptism appropriately, but because of political pressures in his realm, he was baptized before the completion of the church, in the presence of about 100,000 people. Other Kongoese leaders were also baptized at the same time, but others refused, disapproving of the new religion. Mbemba a Nzinga, the second son of the converted Mani-Kongo, was baptized with his father and took the Portuguese name Affonso. His older brother who was heir to the throne, Mpanzu a Nzinga, refused baptism, clinging to the old traditional ways. Pope Innocent VIII sent the Mani-Kongo a banner embroidered with a cross which he had blessed.

Four years later, in 1495, the Mani-Kongo apostasized because of Roman Catholic opposition to the Kongoese custom of polygamy, and renounced Christianity. He banished his Catholic son Affonso and all the Portuguese, but Affonso remained steadfast in his faith even in exile.

About 1506, Affonso ascended the throne of the Kingdom at Mbanza and defeated the pagan opposition led by his brother. He did compromise, however, in following the pagan custom which required him to bury alive one of his relatives. The Jesuits renewed efforts in the Kingdom, and in the first four months, 2100 people were baptized as Roman Catholics. A school and three churches were built and Mbanza was renamed Sao Salvador, meaning Holy Savior.

Later the same year, however, the priests began to buy and sell slaves and to keep concubines, and allied themselves with Sao Tomé against the Portuguese explorer Diogo in order to protect their slaving interests. Diogo, therefore, restricted and later expelled them. Roman Catholic efforts after Affonso were sporadic. They were always enthusiastic at the outset, but always the priests succumbed to the corruption of the slave trade and the availability of concubines. Sporadic efforts were made from about 1542 on by many groups including the Franciscans, Dominicans, Austin Friars, Canons of Santo Eloi, Augustinians, Carmelites, Capuchins and Jesuits, but always with similar unhappy results.

In 1518 Dom Enrique, the son of Kingo Alphonsus I, was nominated as the first indigenous Catholic bishop of black Africa. Enrique died in 1531. In the 1540's and 50's, the Portuguese used the expulsion of the Jesuits as an excuse to further break relations with Kongo and enter the slave trade. However, in 1647 there was another big movement into the Catholic church. Felix de Viler and his colleagues baptized over 600,000 adults from 1647 to 1651.

The Capuchin missionaries in Congo regarded Kongo as a Christian country by right and made Roman Catholic baptism compulsory, holding mass baptisms. Theirs was a large but superficial work in many ways. They did not bother to learn the local languages, for example, but always relied on interpreters. In 1717 the Capuchins withdrew to Angola.

In 1759 the Jesuits were also driven away by native antagonism. The Kwango area in the western central Bandundu Province of what is now DR Congo was Christianized by the Jesuits with their base at Kisantu.

Catholic interest in the Congo, however, has not waned. The Virgin Mary was proclaimed protectress of the Congo in 1891, and a statue called "Our Lady of the Congo" was enshrined in a great new church at Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1954.

In recent years the charismatic movement has touched the Catholic church so that the country, then called Zaire, hosted the first Pan-African Francophone Conference for Catholic Charismatic leaders in Kinshasa Oct. 4-9, 1985. The Catholic church has many development projects in Congo, but many Catholics fell away from the church during the political strife of recent years.

NIGERIA

The first Catholics in Nigeria were the Portuguese who settled there beginning in 1487.

BENIN (Dahomey)

The king of Benin was baptized a Catholic in 1487. Portuguese Catholics began to settle there in 1680.

ANGOLA

Angola was a part of the Kingdom of Kongo. The first Catholic mission was built at San Salvador in 1491 by Portuguese Jesuits. Later, in the late 1600's, the Capuchins baptized vast numbers, mostly infants.

CONGO BRAZZAVILLE

The first Catholic mission by the Portuguese collapsed soon after its start in 1491. It was not revived until 1883. The Capuchins worked in Congo in the 1600's and baptized vast numbers, mostly infants.

KENYA

The first Catholics in Kenya were Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) and Portuguese explorers. By 1597, they had made 600 African converts. In 1631 the prior of Mombasa, two priests, and 280 lay persons were massacred by the apostate Swahili sultan Cingulia after refusing to renounce the Christian faith. In 1985, Kenya hosted the sixth workshop of the Apostolate to Nomads in Nairobi with 42 participants from Roman Catholic dioceses across East Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA

Portuguese Catholics built a church at Mossel Bay, Natal, in 1501.

TANZANIA

Modern Tanzania was then called Tanganyika and Zanzibar. The first Catholics there were the Portuguese at Kilwa. Beginning in 1550, Jesuit and Dominican missionaries arrived.

GHANA

In Ghana, then called the Gold Coast, the Catholics baptized the chief of Efutu with 1,300 of his subjects in 1503.

MOZAMBIQUE

The first Catholic mission was that of the Portuguese Dominicans in 1506. In 1541 Mozambique was visited by Francis Xavier. In 1560 Gamba, King of Inhambane, was baptized, taking the name Constantine.

COMORO ISLANDS

The first Catholics were French settlers who arrived in 1517, the same year Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Wittenburg church, resulting in the Protestant Reformation.

MADAGASCAR

The first Catholic mission to Madagascar appeared in 1540.

GUYANA (Later British Guiana)

The first missions in Guyana were Portuguese Catholic beginning in 1548.

ZIMBABWE (Later Southern Rhodesia)

The first missionary to Zimbabwe was a Portuguese Jesuit in 1561. The emperor of Monomotapa was baptized by him but later apostasized and killed the missionary a year later.

MALAWI (Later Nyasaland)

The first missionaries in Malawi were Catholics from Mozambique in 1561.

FRENCH GUIANA

The first Catholics came to Guiana in 1598 as a French settlement. The first mission there was established by French Holy Ghost priests in 1877.

IVORY COAST

The first Christians in the Ivory Coast were Portuguese Catholic traders in 1637.

CHAD

Catholic Capuchins launched the first mission into Chad in 1663. It was later abandoned until 1929.

GABON

Catholic Capuchins from Italy founded the first mission to Gabon in 1673.

BURUNDI

The White Fathers started a Catholic mission in Burundi (then Urundi) in 1879.

SOMALIA

The first mission in Somalia was Catholic, established in 1881.

TUNISIA & ALGERIA

In 1870 Cardinal Lavignerie (1825-1892) created the White Fathers and White Sisters Orders (Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa) for work among Muslims of Tunisia and Algeria. It was the same year that the Roman Church Council declared the Pope to be infallible.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (Then Ubangi-Chari)

The first mission in the CAR was Roman Catholic, begun in 1894.

MALI

The first mission in Mali was the White Fathers (Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa) from Senegal. They began work in 1895.

EGYPT

Although the first attempt to establish a Roman Catholic patriarchate in Alexandria was unsuccessful in 1824, in 1895 the Roman Pope was successful in this undertaking.

END OF PORTUGUESE INFLUENCE ON THE EAST COAST OF AFRICA

The Portuguese influence which had been strong because of Portuguese explorers and traders was virtually extinguished along the East coast of Africa by 1631.

INFLUENCE OF THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

The charismatic movement has touched the Catholic church in Africa in recent years, so that Uganda hosted the National Catholic Charismatic Leaders Conference in 1985 with 130 leaders present, and Zaire hosted the first Pan-African Francophone Leaders Conference of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (ICCRO) with the theme "A Holy People" in Kinshasa in 1985. One hundred Catholic leaders attended.

In 1986 an Afro-Asian Ecumenical Colloquium on Spirituality and Liberation in Post-Independent Africa and Asia was held in New Delhi, India.

STATUS OF MISSIONARIES

In 1914 there were 5,977 Roman Catholic missionaries in the whole of Africa (and 4,273 Protestant).