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## THE SERVICE OF THE VINCENTIANS TO THE ABYSSINIAN CLERGY

by A. Zerachristos Yosief, C.M.

For a better understanding of our service to the Abyssinian clergy in our concrete historical existence, two periods need to be distinguished. The first would be the period which goes from the entrance of St. Justin De Jacobis in Eritrea/Ethiopia until the Second World War (1839/1945) and the second period from 1947/48 until our own times.

### **Saint Justin De Jacobis and the Clergy of the Local Church.**

There is much which is already known by everyone about Christianity in Eritrea/Ethiopia and which needs no further discussion here. We all know that St. Justin was not the first or the only person to have come as a missionary and spoken of Catholicism, much less of Christianity. We learn from history that there have been various attempts to introduce Catholicism into this land with its long history of Christianity. (I refer to that part of the territory where our saint lived and worked and which in general is called Abyssinia. It comprises Eritrea and North Ethiopia). However, it remains a fact: if today there is strong Catholicism in Eritrea and in the north of Ethiopia, it is due to him. This Catholicism has also one characteristic - in both countries: there is a unified rite and liturgy. People pray in the same way and with the same words and this was possible thanks to the open Christian vision of our Father, who understood at a deep level from the very beginning that it made no sense to push "*Latinism*", as much as through the desire to be distinguished from the local church.

So we ask ourselves what distinguished St. Justin from the other missionaries who came before and after him? It seems to me that what distinguished St. Justin was his conception of the church and the local clergy as much as his formation and his personal rapport with the same clergy. Certainly, it is an exaggeration when people say of him that "*He participated in the rough life of the Abyssinians in everything except sin.*" (1) Nevertheless, one cannot deny that he participated in the difficult life lived in our parts, especially at that time. However, he lived it as a weak man and a sinner, not as a divine man. Thus, we must say that he participated in everything and to the depths of things, as he himself says in a letter to the Father General of the time, Father Etienne, whom he was asking to send strong missionaries to aid him.(2).

One thing is certain: St. Justin lived poorly and humbly amongst the poor. It seems to me that his greatness and his credibility actually depend on this lifestyle of his. His temptation would have been to present himself as rich in all senses; rich in pocket and in culture and therefore, as someone who must give

without ever receiving, someone who must teach without ever learning. St. Justin put aside and overcame definitively this temptation and he sent himself to school to learn and actually to defend the language, the rite and the customs of his priests. All in all, he made himself poor to earn his poor priests and to be earned by them at the same time.

Another thing which distinguished Justin De Jacobis from the other missionaries, though these may have been Vincentians and actually amongst his most loyal collaborators - was his conception of the Abyssinian clergy. First of all and above all, we must say that the matter of the formation of the local clergy was not just any ordinary matter for St. Justin: it was the central and the most important missionary activity.(3). Hardly arrived in Abyssinia, we find him preoccupied with building the seminary, already in 1845 in Guala. But then he transferred to Alitiena. Already in those few years St. Justin led the following conviction in regard to the local clergy for his church:

*"An Abyssinian priest who is profoundly Catholic and sufficiently instructed, because of his perfect knowledge of the language, the customs and down to the prejudices of his compatriots ... labours here with incomparably superior success to that of a European ... as they (his priests) follow the Eastern liturgy and Catholic discipline, for this reason they advance the Catholic cause rapidly in a people such as this, who will not be convinced except by what they can see and count by hand. In fact, the three Abyssinians whom we have with us do on their own what all of us Europeans can ... notwithstanding this visible advantage (however) they must be educated not by others but by the sons of Saint Vincent ..."*(4) St. Justin is perfectly in line with Saint Vincent in how much to "help" or "instruct" the clergy is not an optional work but is the *raison d'être* and the supreme aim of the little company. This conviction of Saint Justin was of no small account. We wonder, however, how he wished to form his priests? St. Justin does not seem to be preoccupied, at least at the beginning, with the superiority of the intellectual formation which was to mark the discontinuity between his priests and those of the Abyssinian church. In fact, the study plan adopted in the seminary of Saint Justin seems similar to that of monks in the monasteries:

*"Until midday,"* says abba Asheba in his diary, *"we learned Amanc Ge'ez and Ethiopian song; (more precisely, the sung Mass or otherwise all the songs which the liturgy of the Ge'ez rite includes) then in the afternoon on the other hand, we learned French."* (5) St. Justin in his letter of the 17th February 1844 asked to dress as do the Abyssinian priests and said in his letter: *"I believe that the principle of the Congregation in question, which is the principle of the Founding Saint himself, is that the missionaries may wear habits which are as near as possible to those worn by the most exemplary priests of the country in which they live. Here the priests are dressed in this way: they have a big white shirt, with wide trousers, also white, bare feet and a white turban on the head, and a big coat which is also white. I am dressed in this matter."* (6) It seems

clear to me that his own priests also followed his example; that through the fact of becoming Catholics they do not abandon these customs of the exemplary priests, as he calls them. (7)

## THE ATTITUDE OF JUSTIN DE JACOBIS TOWARDS HIS PRIESTS

According to Delmonte, also a Vincentian Missionary close to St. Justin in his last years, De Jacobis made this moving observation about the local Abyssinian priests.... *"The monks are my eyes, my mouth, my hands and my feet. They do what I cannot do and they do better than me what I do myself..."* (8) This is the best means of expressing his affection and his esteem and his recognition towards the priests newly-converted to Catholicism. And as he wanted to help *"his priests like members of his own family, he loved them with the care of a father and as such provided for their maintenance and for all their needs ... he believed in treating them like this to keep them united to him ... so that they might be as productive as possible."* (9).

From Paris, however, came the accusation that he was *"buying"* conversions. (10). This behavior of St. Justin was displeasing not only to the Superiors who lived far away (Paris) but also to his future successor in the guidance of the Abyssinian mission - Biancheri. Mons. Pane says that as regards the formation of the native clergy, the opinions of De Jacobis and those of Biancheri were (11) *"two opposing poles"*. Is this an exaggeration? Perhaps, but there is also the chronicled fact that after the death of St. Justin the clergy rebelled under the guidance of Biancheri. Thus, they refused to accept him as their bishop. The hows and whys of it are described by Delmonte in his letter of the 2nd April 1861; the Catholic monks of Halai, with Abba Emnetu at their head, had entered into open conflict with Mons. Lorenzo Biancheri, the successor of De Jacobis *"because of a widespread uneasiness ... little misunderstandings...on the one hand rebellion and insubordination were exploding and on the other ... the harshness and narrow-mindedness (of Biancheri.)"* (12). The divergences between De Jacobis and Biancheri were such that St. Justin gives the impression of regretting making him his successor in the bishopric, and above all of having entrusted him with the care of the new mission. At least so it seems from the letter of October 1859 addressed to Fr. Guattni. (13). Apart from this incident in the chronicle, caused to a great extent by the characters of these two personalities, (14) who principally were the people who suffered for this mission, there has always been a certain continuity even of content in the formation on the part of the Vincentian missionaries, as we can read in history. However, it is aware also of a certain change. After the death of Biancheri, a man loyal to the *"Propaganda Fide"* and a man who did not have a lot of credibility with the Superiors in Paris, Fr. Etienne put a condition to the Vatican and to the missionaries working in Abyssinia: If the mission was to continue, it had to join with the French Lazarists or else it would be definitely closed. (15) Willingly or unwillingly, the group accepted this determined and decisive proposal. The first French Missioners sent by this Superior General

would arrive in Massawa on the 23rd March 1866. They were Mons. Bel et Pierre Piccard: this last would remain in Abyssinia for a good 38 years and would die in Alitena in 1904.

Mons. Bel found on his arrival 27 Abyssinian priests, 19 of which had been ordained by Mons. Massaia, 6 by St. Justin and the remaining 2 by Mons. Bianchari. Mons. E3el would found a seminary in Massaw; in the warmer months the seminarians took refuge in Hebo.

He had eight major seminarians and another eight minor seminarians. Because of the severity of this Confrere they left not only the seminary, but also the religion. Mons Touvier says that he was in conflict with eight local priests and in the seminary only one of the teachers remained..(16)

Under the guidance of Mons. Touvier, the seminary would be established in Keren, in North Eritrea. This seminary held from 20 to 4a boys. The judgements which are given to the seminarians and of the seminary itself are always the same; the mental layout and the judgement criteria are always based on the models of the European Seminaries and Seminarians.

### **WHAT DID THEY HAVE TO LEARN IN THE SEMINARY?**

- Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia
- Ge'ez, the official language of the Abyssinian liturgy
- Latin, useful instrument for theological study
- And, finally, singing, for one hour every day ( 17)

Among the shadows of the persecution, this sensitivity in the formation of the Abyssinian clergy would remain present on the part of our confreres until the 20th January 1895, - an unforgettable date in as much as it was on this day they were hunted out, by a decree of expulsion along with the French Confreres from Italian Eritrea. As a consequence, everything would end up in the hands of the Capuchians(18) Clearly, the Capuchins did not have the same sensitivity as the Vincentians for apart from Fr. Michele de Carbonara, their "*option*" was for the Latin rite with all the consequences of this option. In Eritrea we had to wait for 1947\48 for the new beginning of this mission whereas in central North Ethiopia in 1897 the Superior General on the request of the Propoganda Fide group sent new missionaries: P. Coubbeaux would be the new Superior of the mission, accompanied by three other confreres. This time the zones entrusted to the Vincentians were Tigrai, Godjam, and part of Shewa (Amhara).

## THE NEW BEGINNING IN ERITREA

One could say that this new beginning came through a purely historical coincidence, at least from the human point of view. The missionaries who began this new adventure had come as military chaplains in Mussolini's Italian army. But whatever about the historical circumstances, in 1948 construction began on a house in Hebo, where there is the tomb of our Saint. This new beginning started where St. Justin's life finished. Symbolically, it's perfect. These confreres, two at the beginning, through the example of St. Justin, had one preoccupation only; to form Vincentians who should educate the native clergy as St. Justin wanted. For this, even before finishing the construction of the Hebo house, they opened the Hebo apostolic school. And immediately afterwards they began to educate seminarians throughout the diocese of Asmara. In the years from 1950 to 1968, our confreres were involved on various fronts - on one side completing the buildings, on the other building the hearts of the young people, future leaders of the Church. These confreres, apparently convinced by the attitude of the time, were, thank God, in favour of our customs and our rites. Even if they did not wish to learn it and practise it, they walsy encouraged and supported the essence and practice of the Abyssinian Church. That meant a great deal. From 1968 onwards, on the contrary, the house in Hebo was and still is involved in the formation of diocesan clergy. This permanent formation of the clergy functions in the following manner: with monthly retreats, or even sometimes every two months, with annual spiritual exercises, and sometimes on going formation courses (which we intend to continue). But it has to be said that, notwithstanding the goodwill on everyone's part, that was not always possible, in as much as the political situation did not permit it. Since 1991 we have a new political situation; we are looking into new possibilities and a new methodology suited to this new situation- with a new thrust of our charisma with and through the Church of St. Justin De Jacobis.

Thank you for your attention.

[nota1] Cfr Annals of the Mission 82 (1975) p. 14.

[nota2] St Justin, in order to have the help of missionaries who would be capable of resisting everything and who would have a sense of mortification, was describing the situation of life in the new mission, compared obviously to the European one and said on this account: "*Here we sleep on the ground, we eat dreadful bread and sometimes unappetizing goats meat. No fruit, no wine, no fish. We walk barefoot*".

[nota3] Mons. Pane expresses this fundamental preoccupation of De Jacobis in the following manner: "*The native clergy was for him the work which cost him*

*much sacrifice, many tears and much work; it had been the dream of his missionary life, the fulcrum on which he intended to hang the development of the mission"*

Cfr. in s. Pane, The Life of Blessed Justin De Jacobis, p. 907.

[nota4] De Jacobis himself who was writing in his letter of the 28th September 1846, addressed to Fr. Etienne, the superior General of the time. In this letter St. Justin saw the Vincentians suitable to form this clergy with which he had so much to do, but specifying which type of confrere is at the high level needed for doing this (in as much as not all do and live as befits a missionary): "*Brothers who are capable of sustaining the harshest privations.*"

The above-quoted letter Cf. Annals of the Mission 82 (1975) p. 45.

[nota5] In fact, the end of the congregation besides its own perfection and the evangelization of the poorest of the countryside, we must "*help the ecclesiastics to acquire the knowledge and virtue necessary to their state.*" (Cfr. Regole Communi p.1)

[nota6] This testimony of Abba Atsbeha, to be absolutely precise, does not belong to the exact period of St. Justin, but it is surely a tradition indented and actualized by the Vincentisms who came after him. In the era of St. Justin, a printing press with Ge'ez characters was invented at the Vatican.

St. Justin sent several books translated from and into Latin/Amaric to Rome. In his letter of the 29th June 1858 he listed the books sent. Here are some:

- The Ethiopian Rite with the Latin translation and notes. The Tract on Christian Truths
- The History of the Bresie existing in Ethiopia.
- The Grammar and the Dictionary of the Ge'ez language written by abba Ghebremichel in collaboration with the missionaries. A book; on the Spiritual Exercises All this u /as meant lo serve in the formation or his priests.

[nota7] Cfr. Letl. Man 11, no. 209 and other testimonies say of him:

*"In general he dressed like the Abyssinians but even worse than them, he was extremely poor, he went around dressed like the poor people."* (This testimony is from Father Delmonle)

[nota8] Cfr. Fr. Delmonle. Arch Storico Diocesi di Napoli 1c. p. 347.v. quoted from the Annali of the Mission 82 (1975) p. 18.

[nota9]Cfr. P. Salvatore Pane, op. cit. p.907.

[nota10]St. Justin replied to their accusations very gently but without hiding the gravity of the matter, saying to them, "*it it is in the interest of the Abyssinian mission, to wich I have dedicated my whole life, that I be hunted out ol it, I beg*

*you not to save me... make a clean break;*" Cfr. Lett. Man 11 n 231. The Superiors did not understand that the saint was one of the few missionaries who had come with the power of the "world" which is Jesus Christ and not with the power of the full pocket.

[nota11] Cfr. S. Pane op. cit. p 907

[nota12] This letter was quoted by Chierotti, in his article "*Fr. Carlo Delmonte (1827-1869). The Missionary dearest to Justin De Jacobis*" in *Annals of the Mission, X* (1975) p11 and it can be found at the ASDN. This author says that the crisis had already begun before the death of De Jacobis, when Bianchen had openly declared himself opposed to the importance given to the native clergy and their maintenance at the expense of the budget of the mission. On the 11th October 1859 and thus a year before his death, he came to write to P. Guarini as follows: "*Know well what a mistake I made when I did my best so that Signor Biancheri might become Monsignor Biancheri.*" Cfr. Lett Man of Mons. De Jacobis vol. 11 n.402) at the General Arch of the Congregation of the Mission in Rome. The quotation is taken from CHIEROTTI *ivi.* already cited in the preceding note.

[nota13] Wishing to justify and to find the interpretative key to these differences of opinion between these two personalities, van Winsen presents De Jacobis as the "*Idealist*" whereas Biancheri would be the "*Realist*". If by "*realism*" one means a concrete and achievement-oriented vision; that is a vision which takes into account sufficiently the cultural and environmental situation, the realist is not Biancheri but De Jacobis. Whatever it was no ordinary difference. To reason in economic terms at the expense of the formation and the help given to the clergy as not to the benefit of the mission, and this was exactly the preoccupation of De Jacobis: The White Saint for all the Abyssinians of all religions.

[nota14] Generally, De Jacobis is portrayed as a good kind, loving man, with a mother's heart. Biancheri himself portrays him thus on the the January 1845 "*tender as a mother*", that is \_ arm-hearted, sympathetic and understanding loving and lovable... whereas Biancheri portrays himself with the priest's authority; that is, a cold blooded man, a man living in his head, a man capable of standing back...

This and note 13 can be seen in Dr. G.A. Ch. Van Winsen: "*One hundred and fifty years of Priestly Formation by the Lazarists in Ethiopia*" in *Ethiopian Review of Cultures*, theological philosophical centre, Addis Abeba, Vo 1 1991 pp 87-88.

[nota15] Cfr. Van Winsen op. cit p. 88



[nota16] This is the testimony of Touvier, qtuoted by van Winsen, op cit. P98-100

[nota17] Cfr. van Winsen, op. cit. p. 105: As one can see the continuity between De Jacobis and the study plan of his seminary run by our confrees seems guaranteed. The frundamental elements of the formation dreamed of by De Jacobis are present: The Side of the Orthodox Catholic Discipline, Ge'ez. Singing.

[nota18]If the decree was for the 20th January 1895, our missionaries were already leaving Massawa on the 30th January 1895. And, sandly, on 4th February, 1895 they were leaving Keren with al the glorious and grandiose works wich they had there; including the first and only printing press in Ge'ez characters from our parts which was handed over to the Capu chins. The orphanage of the Daughters of Charity on the other hand, was given to the Daughters of Saint Anna.