

Ethiopia and Christianity

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[This pamphlet is reproduced here for 2 reasons.

[Firstly for its innate historical value as a record of how the Australian Catholic Truth Society attempted to enlighten its readers on a region of the world far distant from its shores but, at the time, the centre of much international controversy. The 1930's saw the invasion of Ethiopia by Mussolini's Fascist armies of Italy and an ineffectual sanctions policy imposed by the League of Nations. Much has changed since this pamphlet was written. Ethiopia was liberated from Italian control and the Second World War was fought and won by the Allied powers. The ruling emperor, Haile Salassie, whom the Italians had once exiled, was deposed in 1974 and a brutal Marxist dictatorship took his place. This in turn was to fall after years of famine and civil war. The pamphlet is a reminder to us to pray for these brothers in Christ who have suffered much.

[The second reason for reproducing this pamphlet is simply to remind modern 'seekers of the truth' of the existence of a version of Christ's religion which has ancient roots, was unhappily separated from the source of unity in the successor of the apostle Peter in Rome, and yet which stands in stark contrast to any upstart version of Christianity such as the world was not to see until the aberration known as the Protestant Revolt occurred in Western Europe in the sixteenth century.]

Christianity in Ethiopia

This account of Christianity in Ethiopia (or Abyssinia) is indebted to many sources of information. but notably to a study of the subject by Father E. Pellegrino, S.J.

THE northern region of Africa, running along the Mediterranean Sea, is divided from the rest of the continent by a barrier more effectual than any ocean - the Sahara Desert. On the other hand, the great Nile River, which formed the natural entrance into Africa for the peoples of the Mediterranean shore, led them as far south as Ethiopia, but rarely beyond its forbidding borders. Thus, to Northerners that region became the typical, but mysterious, region of Africa, a land reached by few, and from which still fewer visitors returned. Such a region of mystery it was for Homer and for Herodotus; and such a region of mystery it may be said to have remained till some sixty years ago [that is about 1870-1880]. For the various peoples of Africa itself, Ethiopia remained a wall between them and the developing cultures of Asia and Europe.

Thus did Ethiopia itself become a singular country, a meeting-point of races and cultures. This may be seen in its physical types. The skin is of many shades from bronze to absolute black; but the more outstanding characteristics of the negro type, such as the flattened nose and thick lips, are absent.

Today's Ethiopia is a part, and has often been regarded as a central part, of the vast, vaguely-defined ancient Empire of Ethiopia. Among the various origins recognized or conjectured by scholars for the peoples of Ethiopia, one of the most interesting is that which supposes an immigration of Jews

to have taken place at the time of the Babylonian captivity - the sixth century before Christ - with probable additions of Jewish refugees at later times. In fact, mingled with customs and ideas that recall primitive barbarism, there are found distinct elements of Jewish provenance. On the primitive beliefs that have continued to influence disastrously Ethiopian life we have not space to dwell; we may mention that they are peculiarly marked in matters regarding health, sickness, medicine and hygiene, as to which the ignorance and superstition of the Ethiopian in general has the worst effects upon human life, and upon child life in particular. As to Hebrew traditions, they are seen in the Coptic canon of the Scriptures (of which a word later on), in the importance given to certain saints of the Old Testament, feasts such as that of Tabernacles, and rites such as that of circumcision.

Statistics of the Various Religions in Ethiopia.

So far, no exact statistics are available. The population of the country has been variously estimated at from five to ten millions. Supposing it to be about eight millions, the following approximate estimate of the strength of the various religions is the best that can be arrived at until an accurate census can be taken:

Coptic Christians - 4,000,000

Moslem followers of Mohammed - over 3,000,000

Pagans - over 1,000,000

Jews - 50,000

Native Catholics - 20,000

Origins - Fabled and Real.

According to their own self-flattering traditions, their origin brings the Ethiopian Empire back to King David through Solomon, who was the father of the first Ethiopian Emperor (or Negus), Menelik I. A manuscript kept in their holy city of Axum says:

"The earth is divided into two parts: from the centre of Jerusalem to the north it belongs to the King of Rome; from the centre of Jerusalem to the south it belongs to the Negus of Ethiopia, including India and Arabia, because these are the ancient inheritance of Sem, son of Noah, and later of the tribe of Abraham, David and Solomon. The King of Rome is indeed descended from Solomon, but the King of Ethiopia was the elder brother."

(Footnote: Axum was the ancient capital of Ethiopia but especially of Tigre, the northern part of Ethiopia. It is still regarded as a sacred city, though for centuries in ruins. The "Ethiopia" mentioned in Acts 8:27 as the country to which the converted eunuch belonged was (according to some scholars) probably not today's Ethiopia, but the Isle of Meroe, at the mouth of the Nile.)

The genuine superiority of Ethiopia over most of its neighbours rests in the fact that the true Ethiopian people have been always, and still are, Christians. And it is indeed wonderful that while the Churches of the East and of Africa fell victims long ago to Islam, this remotest of Churches, left to itself, cut off from Rome, should have withstood the repeated assaults of anti-Christian forces and remained a bulwark against Islam (or the religion of Mohammed) along the coast of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Does it not well, then, on this ground, deserve our sympathetic attention? And missionary zeal will discern in Ethiopia something yet more - the value it would have, if once brought into unity with Rome, in the conversion of the millions of souls of Central Africa.

The Ethiopians are Christians of Very Ancient Date.

Before England, before Germany, even a century before Ireland, Ethiopia was converted to the Faith.

At the beginning of the fourth century a merchant vessel sailing from Tyre, in Phoenicia, landed at a harbour of Ethiopia in the Red Sea. But the natives of the coast attacked and plundered the vessel, and massacred all whom they met on board. Returning from their misdeeds, the barbarians found two youths who had escaped quietly reading and singing under a tree. They seized them and led them off to the court of Axum. There the king, struck with their exceptional qualities, gave them posts at his court. After his death, AEdesius and Frumentius (for such in Latin form were their names) were charged with the education of the princes and with the regency of the kingdom. The brothers profited by the power thus given to them to spread the beliefs and practice of Christianity. The hereditary prince, on becoming king, granted to the two foreigners permission to return to their own country. One returned, but the other made his way to Alexandria to ask of the Patriarch a bishop for the young Ethiopian Church. The Patriarch, who was none other than St. Athanasius, decided that St Frumentius himself was the man destined by God for the responsible post. Consecrated Bishop, Frumentius returned, and, under the name, not as before of "Faramentos," but of "Abba Salama," which means "Father of peace," he baptized his pupil the king, and then devoted his life to the conversion of the kingdom. Thus Ethiopia dates its Christianity back to 341.

But it lay in God's providence that from the beginning its Christianity should be exposed to assaults. The news of the new community developing in Africa was brought to the Emperor Constans at Constantinople. This man, a bitter and persecuting Arian, sent a message to the rulers at Axum, calling them "brothers," and bidding them drive out "that charlatan, Frumentius," and accept in his stead a bishop from the Arian Patriarch of Alexandria (who had temporarily supplanted Saint Athanasius). But the people stood firm with Frumentius, and would not accept the new bishop or the new doctrine offered to them. The first assault of heresy had failed.

On the death of Frumentius, the Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria consecrated and sent to Axum a new "Abuna," who was a holy Egyptian monk. Since that time it has been traditional to seek an "Abuna" - that is, a chief bishop - from Egypt.

The Faith was spread over plains and mountains. When the anchorites of Egypt and Syria were compelled to fly in large numbers from before the Arian persecutions, many came up the River Nile and were hospitably received by the Ethiopians. Of nine of these the names have remained in the chronicles, and these call them "Romans," not because they came from Rome, but because they belonged to the Church of Rome. [The Roman Church, with different rites, by 451 embraced the five great Patriarchs of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch in Syria, Constantinople and Jerusalem.] These nine Catholic saints built on lofty plateaux monasteries which borrowed names from the Old Testament. Some of these plateaux, like the "mesas" of Mexico, are extraordinarily steep at their sides, while flat and cultivable on top. It was related how one Abuna, the saintly Aragui, took possession of a peculiarly inaccessible "amba" - so these plateaux were called - in a striking and original manner. He tied himself by a rope to the tail of a mighty serpent, which then drew him to the summit of the ridge; then he reached down the rope to his followers, who all ascended in turn; and on the airy summit thus gained they founded the monastery of Debre Damo. Even to this day a rope is used in climbing to it. The community and increasing numbers of others like them became venerated and powerful among the peoples of the plains, who sought the help of their blessings and

prayers. [It is believed that it was from about 450 that increasing numbers of Monophysite monks took refuge in the Ethiopian Highlands.]

Between Moslems and Monophysites.

In the seventh century Mohammed began his series of conquests. He paid no effective attention to remote Ethiopia. But he conquered Egypt, where, unhappily, the Christians, divided by the Monophysite heresy, were so much the less able to hold their own against him. (More will be said of the Monophysite heresy later on.) The Monophysite Patriarch of Alexandria, Benjamin, had to quit Alexandria for Cairo, and about the same time the use of Greek in the liturgy was given up for that of Egyptian or "Coptic." [This process had been in train for a long time, but now the Monophysites, for nationalistic reasons, abandoned all connections with 'Greek' elements in the liturgy. Ironically, the Catholics, called 'Melkites' by their Monophysite opponents, abandoned their ancient Alexandrian Liturgy 'of St Mark' in favour of the Greek liturgy of Byzantium or Constantinople at about this time as well.] From that time the rites of Egypt and of Ethiopia have commonly been called "Coptic," a word that implies Egyptian origin. Amid the grievous trouble of the time the Ethiopian Abuna died, and the representatives of the Church went to Egypt to seek a successor. But whom were they to approach? The Catholic patriarch had died - poisoned by his heretical enemies. Unwilling to return without an Abuna, they accepted one at the hands of Benjamin. He selected and consecrated a certain Abba Cyrillos, who thus became the first Monophysite chief of the Ethiopian Church.

Thus began a sad situation. Cut off completely from Rome by neighbours either Moslem followers of Mohammed or Monophysites, the church lost its vitality, as does the branch severed from the vine. A crowd of Egyptian monks, who followed the entrance of heresy, were glad to escape from the Moslems by occupying the mountain heights; they were usually of a low type, in manners and morals, and propagated among the simple people the most odious calumnies concerning the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Leo I, the Empress Pulcheria, and all the opponents of the heresy they obstinately (though often in sheer ignorance) clung to.

The followers of Mohammed, meantime, were bent on subduing this recalcitrant country. Their Vizier at Cairo tried to ingratiate himself with the monks as their protector; in return he induced an Abuna to attempt propaganda for his own false creed. But the people protested indignantly, and from that day, in the face of assaults and persecutions perpetually recurring, the Ethiopians have maintained a firm front against the Crescent and the errors it champions.

A Black Crusade.

We hasten to the thirteenth century, when the Negus began to dream of a coalition with the Western Franks, then committed to the idea of the Crusades, as the new hope of a successful resistance to Ethiopia's hereditary enemies. We read of some heroic episodes belonging to that time. The atrocious murder, by fanatical followers of Mohammed, of an Ethiopian pilgrim to Jerusalem led to a religious war, in which the Negus gained a complete victory, brought the Caliph to his capital as a chained suppliant, and there put him to death - this at the demand of his nobles, who would not hear of pity for the "slayer of Christians and the burner of churches."

During another campaign the Negus gathered his troops, and, whilst a monk held aloft the Cross by his side, he thus addressed them: "Our worst enemies are the people of Adal (followers of Mohammed and his Islamic religion). I lead you forth against them; but not in the hopes of booty. For myself, I should esteem it disgraceful to make any profit by the blood of my subjects. Be

witnesses that I fight only as a soldier of Christ. I swear that, even if no more than a dozen brave men follow my lead, I will go forward to attack the enemy." He went back into his tent to hear Mass and receive Communion. The soldiers, inspired to a like generosity, having won the victory, made a pile of the booty and burnt it to ashes.

Campaigns conducted in such a spirit went on from 1330 to the middle of the sixteenth century. The West knew not that in that byway of the world a struggle of the Cross against the Crescent was going on that might have stirred the emulation of any of its own crusaders. For, in truth, throughout the Middle Ages Ethiopia had remained a land of myth. The geographers hesitated as to whether to place it in India or Africa or Mongolia. It was a land ruled by "Prester John," a priestly potentate gifted apparently with immortality. But a clearer view of realities came with the sixteenth century.

The Last Offensive.

One of the last and most terrible assaults on Christian Ethiopia was made in 1530 by the Moslem freebooter, Ahmed ben Ibraim, called by the Ethiopians "Gragne" - that is, "the Left-handed." He went from success to success, slaughtering thousands, burning and wasting, penetrating into the hitherto virgin recesses of the Tigre, while the Negus fled from "amba" to "amba," finding shelter among the monks.

Then a despairing effort was made to gain help from the Christian peoples of the West. These, on their part, were no longer so ignorant of Ethiopian conditions as they had been for sixteen centuries. There were still among them, in a Christianity distracted with heresy and schism, some good and zealous soldiers of the Cross, and they realized that they were called on to bring some aid to their hard-pressed fellow-Christians of ancient Ethiopia.

In 1520, 10 years earlier, a Portuguese ship had put in at the Ethiopian port of Massawa [in modern Eritrea]. The natives were horrified and fled. When a few, regaining courage, returned, they were asked concerning their religion. For reply, they pointed to a monastery on a distant mountain. The Portuguese started on the difficult march of exploration inland. But with their knowledge of the country and its capital came disappointment and disgust. The realm of Prester John proved to be anything but an Eldorado. Nor when they met the Negus was either party well satisfied with the other. The potentate coldly expressed his satisfaction that the Portuguese were "still Christians."

Nothing came of this first expedition. There remained behind in Ethiopia, however, one of the Portuguese party, whose name was John Bermudez. In the terrible days of 1530 the rulers turned their eyes towards him. They promised to be reconciled with the Church of Rome if he would obtain for them the help of Portugal. We do not know when or where Bermudez got tonsured as a cleric, but it is a fact that in 1530 the promoters of national defence prevailed on the aged Abuna to yield his patriarchal see to "the pious Master John Bermudez, Roman Catholic," who thenceforward styled himself "Patriarch of Alexandria, of the sea and of Ethiopia." He gratified his flock by obtaining from the King of Portugal, John III, a force of five hundred musketeers, drawn from Goa, and commanded by Cristoforo da Gama, son of the famous Vasco. An animated year of hostilities followed. Gragne mocked the Christian leader by sending him as gifts a hood and a rosary, with the message: "That's all this man deserves; he is no captain." But Cristoforo retorted with a looking-glass and hairpins. An engagement followed. The Christians formed into a square and allowed the far more numerous Gragnites to surround them completely. Then Cristoforo gained a victory by the vigorous use of his superior artillery.

But tragedy followed. He was attacked again by Gragne, now reinforced with a Turkish force, which brought to the attack nine hundred rifles and twelve field-guns. The Portuguese, completely overpowered, were decimated, da Gama was taken prisoner and beheaded by the victor's left hand, powerfully wielding a scimitar. The head was sent as a gift to the Sultan at Constantinople.

But Ethiopia had yet resources left, and its ruler did not lose heart. Gathering a new army of natives and Portuguese, the Negus attacked the Left-hander. A lucky shot from a field-gun brought him down; the victory of the Christian army was soon complete; and it was now the turn of their enemy's head to be sent around as a show. That battle of 1543 marked the end of armed Moslem invasion of Ethiopia. Christianity had scored a permanent gain.

We see, therefore, from this review of twelve centuries that Ethiopia is a land radically and historically Christian. It now falls to the lot of Italy to appreciate this aspect of her recent conquest and to rise to the responsibilities involved in the rule of such a country.

What is the Christianity of Ethiopia?

Some writers on the Christianity actually met with in this ancient Church seem inclined to exaggerate its shortcomings. Let us try to give an impartial view of its characteristics.

Unquestionably the Ethiopian Church is infected with heresy. It shares the error of the Monophysites (at least officially) and some other errors that have helped to separate the Eastern Churches from the centre of Catholic truth at Rome. As in other countries infected with heresy and separated from the visible head of the Church, the Hierarchy has always been excessively bound up with the civil power, and consequently has lacked the independence and authority needful for the effective discharge of its spiritual duties. Lamentable shortcomings as to morals have been the inevitable consequence. Ignorance, often gross, has prevailed, and has resulted in abuses and perversions in the use and administration of the Sacraments. The deeply religious disposition of the people has consequently sought satisfaction in exaggerations of external practices of worship and in exaggerated austerities, the latter especially in the matter of fasting. Cardinal Massaia, the nineteenth century Capuchin missionary, who knew the country perfectly, wrote: "Here the reputation of sanctity is attached to practices merely external. Rigid fasts, long exercises of prayer and so on will gain it for a man whose morality is thoroughly corrupt."

Father Giulio Barsotti, S.J., who was an army chaplain in the late Ethiopian war, quotes and makes his own the following gloomy picture of Ethiopian religion painted by Father Coulbeaux, whose authority on the subject is recognized:

"Under external signs and appearances that strike and deceive the beholder, an attentive observer will discover a weak and superficial Christianity that attaches itself to accessories and forgets essentials, enslaves itself to a number of religious practices, and tramples under foot unscrupulously the precepts of the divine law.

"When you begin to move about in Ethiopia, you meet places, reputed holy, that you cannot believe to be houses of God. Can these be churches, these filthy, small, uninhabitable huts? The faithful kiss their outer walls, prostrate themselves at the entrance, and sometimes enter. Inside there are 'sacred' ministers, whose service consists at times in dancing and singing to the sound of cymbals and kettle-drums. Outside these churches you find religious observances mixed with every part of life, but in ways that seem to constitute only a parody of things divine.

"Rigid exactness in certain ritual observances accommodates itself perfectly with all sorts of disorders and vices, and absolutions and sprinklings of holy water go hand in hand with scandalous excesses; the name of the Blessed Virgin is mixed up with indecent jesting. The ignorance of the people can hardly be greater than that of the priests, which is appalling. In a military hospital I have seen their ministry consist of nothing more than ablutions, sprinklings of holy water, kissings of a cross, prayers said with deep-drawn sighs over the sick person. Cross, I have said, not crucifix. For, unhappily, the Monophysite will not show the figure of the dying Christ. According to his creed, Christ had only a divine nature, and, not being human, could not die; it was a phantom of Him that was crucified!

"Alas, is it not true that to take away the crucifix is to ruin our religion? Deny the humanity of Christ, and we all, from His Mother down, are irremediably separated from God. No wonder if this poor Coptic clergy had fallen into the grossest errors in its understanding and teaching of Catholic truth, and given the grossest superstitions room to enter." [Note: Fr Johnston is quoting Fr Barsotti, and not Fr Coulbeaux' *Histoire politique et religieuse de l'Abyssinie*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1929).]

A writer in the "Civilita Cattolica" (December, 1935) adds some lines to the above unfavourable picture. In Ethiopia, he says, "Christian liturgy and observance are mingled with so many corruptions that Christianity is reduced to a mere external formalism, which accompanies corrupt morals and barbarous customs." Yet this writer bears witness to the undeniable survival of the main elements of sound Catholic dogma among (at least) the less ignorant of the monks and in the traditions of the people. The Monophysite error, of which there are various shades and interpretations, is for the vast majority a verbal question of little practical importance.

Schism and Catholic Survivals.

It was at the Council of Chalcedon, held in 451, that the Ethiopian error and schism began. Monophysitism was an exaggerated reaction and opposition to the errors of Nestorius, who denied or obscured the union in Christ of two natures into one Divine Person. The Catholic Faith, as expounded by Pope Leo the Great, there triumphed, while the false doctrine first propounded by Eutychius, and at Chalcedon defended by Dioscurus, Patriarch of Alexandria, was condemned, but not, unhappily, without retaining many adherents, who survive, as in Ethiopia, to the present day. Concerning the Council of Chalcedon, many ridiculous fables circulate among the Copts.

They do accept and recite the Creed so well known to us in the West as the Nicene; they omit from it, however, with all the Greek "Orthodox," the clause "Filioque." [This addition to the text of the liturgical creed was first made in Spain, where it was first sung in the Latin Mass, around the eighth century. Pope St Leo III, around 816, forbade the addition of the Filioque as unnecessary, while reaffirming the truth of the theological doctrine involved. The disputed phrase was first sung in the creed at Rome itself only under Pope Benedict VIII, around 1015.] The Ethiopians hold, accordingly, the mystery of the Trinity, apart from the dogma of the procession of the Holy Ghost from both the Father and the Son; they hold the creation of the universe from nothing, the Incarnation and Divinity of Christ (but not His real humanity), the seven Sacraments, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the veneration of the Mother of God, of angels, saints, relics and images. They admit - theoretically and inconsistently - the primacy of the Pope as the successor of St. Peter, but they deny his doctrinal infallibility.

Their canon of Scripture corresponds with the Catholic, except that they admit into the Old Testament the Book of Enoch and a Third Book of Machabees, and into the New many apocryphal

books, including the two epistles and the "Apostolic Constitutions" attributed to St. Clement. The translation of the Old Testament into the dead Semitic language called "Gheez" [or Ge'ez] seems to have been made from a Greek text that goes back even to St. Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, from 326 to 373. Their apocryphal books, as indeed, unhappily, the genuine parts of Holy Scripture, serve them as plentiful sources of myths and superstitions.

The popular belief in God is disfigured by material conceptions of His nature and aspect. Souls are thought to be propagated like bodies by human parents, but there is also a belief that all souls were created together with that of Adam. Original sin figures among Coptic dogmas, but its nature is only confusedly understood. As to the Immaculate Conception of Mary the Mother of God, it is involved in the belief strongly professed by the Copts that Mary is all pure, all holy, ever Virgin, true Mother of God, and perpetual and universal mediator with her Son. Indeed, the deep and intense devotion manifested amid all errors by this isolated Christian body to the Blessed Virgin is a very strong proof of that devotion and cult having been part of the Catholic Faith brought into Ethiopia by St. Frumentius. They have thirty-three feasts of Mary in their calendar, and precede at least one of these (the Assumption) by a fast of fifteen days. They say that the Ethiopian Empire is a fief presented by Jesus to His Mother and accepted by her as a tithe of the universe.

The Ethiopians believe in the general and particular judgements, the resurrection of the dead, eternal paradise and eternal hell, while the doctrine of Purgatory is implicit in the prayers for the dead that belong to the Mass. There are, however, in circulation many grotesque, erroneous or contradictory conceptions of life after death. It is generally thought that souls are not admitted to the beatific vision till after the general judgement.

The beliefs and practices as to the Sacraments are mixed with errors and abuses; but a fairly adequate ritual of all the seven is found in the Ethiopian books, and faith in their nature and efficacy is general. Thus there is a prevalent dislike of regular religious marriage; it is often delayed for years after a civil contract has been entered into; but once the sacrament has been received, indissolubility is accepted.

Baptism is administered by a triple immersion, but is often delayed for forty or eighty days, in accordance with the Jewish ritual of purification. Confirmation is no longer in use, owing (it is said) to the difficulty of procuring the proper oils. Extreme Unction (or the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick) was formerly administered, as in the Greek Churches generally, with excessively elaborate and long ceremonies, but (probably for that very reason) has long ceased to be administered at all. Confession and absolution from sin is a general practice at the approach of death; apart from that there are no fixed customs. Absolution is given in the deprecatory form, not, as in the West, in the indicative: "May God absolve you (singular)," not "I absolve you (singular)." The Blessed Eucharist is consecrated in leavened bread, and administered under both kinds. The Mass is celebrated with long ceremonious rites, which differ in many respects from those of the West, but retain likenesses to ancient western rituals. In large towns Mass may be celebrated many times a week, and will be preceded by the chanting of psalms; in villages only on feast days. The Blessed Eucharist is never reserved. On the altars may usually be seen a "tabob" (or "tabot" or "ark") - a sort of tabernacle; its use is to hold the blessed altar-stone.

To the ignorance of the priests, especially of the ordinary clergy, we have already referred. Marriage is universal among the latter, and the priestly office is looked upon as a social rather than religious

function, and as something to be transmitted from father to son. No priest, however, may marry twice.

The head of the Ethiopian Coptic Church, called the Abuna, is always a monk taken from the monastery of St. Antony, near Suez, and consecrated by the "Orthodox" (that is "Coptic") Patriarch of Alexandria. He has (but only since 1929) five bishops as auxiliaries, but they are merely such; he alone has the right to consecrate and ordain, and to exercise the functions of ordinary jurisdiction. Always a foreigner, he is always a stranger to the language of his flock. The next personage in importance among the clergy is the "eicegie," or "itshage," head of the monks, whose influence at court and elsewhere was often very great.

[It would seem appropriate to insert the following paragraphs at this point. They are taken from the 1961 book *The Christian Churches of The East - Volume II - Churches Not In Communion With Rome*, by Donald Attwater. (Geoffrey Chapman, London) Pages 196-198.

[For many centuries up to our time the abuna from Egypt was not only the primate of the Ethiopian Church, he was often as not the only bishop. But when Abuna Matthew died in 1926 the negus Haile Salassie, voicing popular opinion, demanded the independence of his church from Egypt. Negotiations went on for three years and ended in a compromise: the patriarch of Alexandria, John XIX, appointed a Coptic monk, Cyril, as abuna, and at the same time ordained four Ethiopian bishops as auxiliaries to the primate. This innovation was a sign of the beginning of the end of Coptic authority in Ethiopia, a process which was hastened by the Italian conquest of the country. Abuna Cyril was sent to Rome and Cairo in 1936 to arrange for the abolition of the Egyptian connexion, but his own attitude was suspect and he was refused readmission to Ethiopia. Three other bishops were then living, and two of them opposed the Italian policy. Thereupon the viceroy, General Graziani, proclaimed the complete independence of the Ethiopian Church, and nominated the third bishop, Abba Abraham, who was blind, to be its first patriarch. At the same time a new itshage and three other bishops were appointed, to whom several more were added later.

[The Coptic patriarch, still John XIX, was naturally stupefied by such an exhibition of high-handedness. Negotiations for a settlement were opened with the Italian government, but nothing came of them, and eventually the patriarch excommunicated Abba Abraham, who died in 1939. After the Italians were driven from Ethiopia during World War II, Abuna Cyril (Qerillos) was restored to office, and the link with the Coptic patriarch was again joined. But a drastic change was now inevitable, and Cyril was followed by the first native Ethiopian abuna, Basil, who was consecrated by the Coptic patriarch Joseph II in Cairo in 1950. The Church of Ethiopia is now (1961) fully autonomous, while continuing to recognize the supreme headship of the Egyptian patriarch; he must be prayed for in the Liturgy, and Ethiopian bishops must take an oath of allegiance to him. On the other hand, those bishops are to take part in electing the Coptic patriarch, and are entitled to be summoned to any council that he may convene to deal with matters of general importance to the two churches.

[ORGANIZATION AND PRESENT STATE [1961]

[Katholikos. The effective head of the Ethiopian Church is now called the "katholikos-patriarch". He is archbishop of Axum, but his residence is with the royal court at Addis Ababa. He alone has the right to ordain bishops, dispense from vows, consecrate chrism and tabots, and crown the king.

[Bishops. There were twelve other Ethiopian bishops in 1960; but as yet there do not seem to be any delimited dioceses, and the bishops are in effect delegates of the katholikos.

[Lower clergy. These do not form a distinguished body. In general they receive little training and are ordained in batches without examination or certificate

of fitness, whence scandals of illiteracy, evil-living, simony and invalid ordinations. Hardly any of them understand their liturgical language, Ge'ez, and some scarcely ever exercise sacerdotal functions; nor do they preach or otherwise instruct their flocks. They are married and form a large semi-hereditary priestly caste. Numerous deacons are ordained as youths.

[Reform of the clergy is a big undertaking, and calls for the establishment of proper institutions for training.]

Slavery.

The long and miserable story of human slavery would gradually, but surely, come to an end in our enlightened and humane days: so thought the "liberal" and other optimists of the nineteenth century. It requires only a very cursory glance over the state of the world to-day to perceive how grievously they were mistaken in their hope. [2005 still sees much of this abuse in neighbouring Arab lands and most particularly in nearby Sudan.] New forms of slavery, justified by new and high-sounding titles and theories, have come to stay with us, and the old forms, never exterminated, while vanishing in some countries, have persevered or even assumed new strength in others up to the most recent times.

Ethiopia is an ancient nest of slave-owners and slave-drivers, and an ancient prison of human beings held under the yoke or terror of servitude. It began to be so in the old days of unrestricted heathendom; then, indeed, there was little hope of kindness towards slaves in a land where annually, or even (in some places) monthly, human victims were immolated to idols or invisible demons, where it was customary when a chief died to destroy a great part of his personal property and put to death his dependants. The evil held unbroken sway for the past two thousand years. But recently slaves in Ethiopia were estimated to number some two millions, most of them men, women and children seized and carried off in border raids. The possession of slaves was considered by the Ethiopian of every class as a normal and, in fact, necessary part of family life. His slave was his beast of burden. He was to be utilized to the utmost degree possible. He had no rights that he could plead, though from self-interest, from good nature, from Christian ideas or feelings, his master might treat him well. What seems most pathetic is that vast numbers of slaves, even though not well treated, were content to remain slaves, so deeply had the iron entered into their souls.

The following story, which appears to be true, is taken from the London "Daily Express". There was a European encampment in the neighbourhood of Addis Ababa, close to a village. Suddenly a loud noise of cries and laments broke out. Someone went from the camp to see what was the matter, and brought back the following account. A certain chief man had informed two of his slaves that he set them free. (The real reason was that, times being hard, he could no longer support them.) They were horrified at the news, and threw themselves at their master's feet, begging him with tears not to be so cruel as to cast them off. They could conceive nothing but worse miseries in a life of freedom. Poor creatures!

Perhaps they had seen and shuddered at the sufferings of other slaves, those dragged along for hundreds of miles to be sold to the highest bidders at the slave-markets. Torn from their villages and kindred, chained like dangerous beasts, treated worse than cattle, they were scourged along by drivers who were satisfied if a good proportion of their live-stock was finally brought to market, while their weaker victims were left along the slave-route to die of hunger, thirst and exhaustion.

The miseries and crimes of African slavery have often been dwelt on. Such men as Cardinal Lavigerie and his helpers made magnificent efforts to abolish its horrors. As regards Ethiopia, so

many such efforts had been made that one may wonder why the results had been so disappointing. But the reasons are many. They belong to the entire nature of the country, its physical character, its rooted tradition, its lack of an effective hold on Christianity, its lack of political unity. From 1857 to 1931 a series of edicts directed against the slave-trade in all its aspects emanated from the central government of the Negus. But, they remained inefficacious in face of the force of tradition and custom, of the huge financial interests that fed on the trade, of the complicity in the evil of the Coptic clergy, of the weakness of the central power when it set itself against local chieftains and their petty tyrannies.

To-day, at last, slavery in Ethiopia is abolished, at least in theory. It may well be that time will be required to make the abolition effective in practice; but as the country feels more and more the influence of ordered rule, the old evils will progressively die out.

What Has the Church Done for Ethiopia?

And now it is time to consider more fully the question - so far only touched upon: "What has the Catholic Church, during the long years of schism, been doing for Ethiopia?"

Among the strange, ancient relics of medieval Christian faith that you meet in Ethiopia are "The Sleeping Saints." In the Tigre district [around Neebi] there are catacombs near an ancient church. There, in long caverns, some of which are more than 300 feet deep, are to be seen rows of skeletons, most of them still wearing the remains of a flowing garment called the "shamma." The schismatics venerate them; but they were not schismatics. It is thought that a curse has ever rested upon their persecutors and on the region that witnessed their persecution. These martyrs, in number no less than 5700, have been called "the sleeping saints," "Isadkou neouman," because they preferred, rather than deny the Faith, to shut themselves up in these caverns and there to "fall asleep in the Lord." They were the converts of a mission of Dominicans that entered Ethiopia in the thirteenth century. [Many of the friars and their converts were murdered by the Abuna Salama.]

Two centuries later there was a contact with Rome more historically notable. In the Council of Florence (1440) a formula for the reunion of the schismatic churches with Rome was presented in the decree called "Pro Jacobitis," and this decree was accepted under oath by representatives of both the Greek and the Coptic Churches. [The Ethiopian abbot of the Dair as-Sultan monastery in Jerusalem was present and consented to these negotiations along with the Syrian Jacobite representative and the abbott legate of the Egyptian Patriarch.]

But the opposition of schismatic bigotry proved too strong and the schism of Greeks and Copts (and therefore of the Ethiopians) went on its way just as before.

The Jesuit Missions.

We have already heard of the efforts made by King John III of Portugal to help the Ethiopians against their Moslem enemies (followers of Mohammed) and towards reunion with the Holy See. (Footnote: John III, an excellent (if not always wise) King, was a friend of St. Francis Xavier and his companions, and did much for the propagation of the Faith. He is characteristically rewarded by the following notice in a modern English encyclopaedia: "John III. (1521-1557) bid fair to wreck the prosperity of Lisbon and his realm at large by being too partial to the whims of the clerical party." ("Everyman's Encyclopaedia.") So is history written!)

About 1522 he discussed with St. Ignatius Loyola the sending of missionaries to Ethiopia. The saint offered to go thither himself, but was dissuaded from this project by the Pope and other advisers. A

dozen Fathers, however, were selected out of the then small society ruled by Ignatius, and at their head was placed Father Oviedo, who received episcopal consecration as Patriarch of Ethiopia in 1555. They reached the court of the Negus, but there, and amongst his people, they met with crosses rather than successes. They made many converts, but not among the monks or the disputants - usually very ignorant - of the Monophysite clergy, who resented the loss of their influence, as did also the party of tradition in general, supported by many ladies of the court. The mission, it seemed, had moved too fast and tried to do too much all at once. The discomfiture of the missionaries was completed by an unfortunate military expedition against the Moslems, in which the Negus suffered defeat and lost his life. His successor was hostile to Roman Christianity and persecuted its adherents; the Patriarch died in consequence of hardships and sufferings; many of the missionaries transferred their activities to the Far East.

Half a century after the mission of Oviedo and his companions, another Jesuit entered Ethiopia. This was Father Peter Paez, the first European who saw the upper waters of the Blue Nile. Taught by the experience of centuries, he adopted prudent and slow tactics, studied the ancient language, liturgy and sacred books of his new country, and gave simple expositions of Catholic doctrine, avoiding heated disputes. The Negus Socinios became a strong partisan of the Father, conversions followed one another so rapidly that by 1622 Ethiopia was largely and officially Catholic. The King formally abjured the Monophysite error; the Monophysite Abuna was deposed. Three years later there was a solemn inauguration of the Catholic Patriarch, Mendez, before whom the Negus swore adherence to the Roman Faith and obedience.

A Brief Golden Era.

Thus had begun a golden era - alas, destined quickly to fade! - for the Church in Ethiopia. The missionaries, in number some twenty, divided themselves into twelve residences. More than a hundred churches were provided with good Catholic priests. Conversions in a single year were recorded at the rate of 8,000 for each residence. At one of the residences there were 130,000 Communion in a year. [This at a time when communion for most Western rite Catholics was a 'once or twice a year' affair.] The liturgy, the seminaries, the schools, were reformed. The "church of Jesus" rose beside the royal palace. The skill of the Jesuits as builders amazed the natives; so did the fine dramatic representations they organized among their scholars. The news was spread throughout Europe that Ethiopia had become Catholic.

But the party of opposition had never died out or yielded. There were immense numbers of ignorant and wandering monks who were furious at losing their "prestige." There were powerful lords, who resented the reign of strict morals. The Government proved not strong enough to persevere in supporting the Catholic movement against its bitter enemies. When a decree was published imposing by the authority of the State certain reforms suggested by the Patriarch, Mendez, in the matter of depraved morals and rites suggestive of Judaism or paganism, the translation of the Roman Missal for liturgical use into the native ritual language, Communion under one kind, and so on, a vast movement of opposition was organized. Rebellion, stirred up by the monks, the native "literati," and the provincial nobility, and with brothers of the Negus himself as its leaders, broke out. The sovereign was called upon to banish the "brood of Pilate" and restore "the Faith of our fathers." Though the Negus offered resistance in arms, he presently wearied of the unceasing conflict and at last yielded to the demands of the anti-Roman rebels.

Thus came to an end the last attempt on a grand scale to convert Ethiopia. The Emperor died not long after his capitulation. His son became an active persecutor. The missionaries were hunted away. Seven, however, lingered on till some of them, with the Patriarch, were stoned, while furious monks cried out: "Whoever is not an enemy of Mary, let him put a hand to the stones." The rest were hanged or otherwise put to death.

New Bands of Missionaries and Martyrs: 1633 to the Present Day.

The era of persecution begun in 1633 lasted up to the twentieth century. The Jesuits having disappeared, the Congregation of propaganda entrusted Ethiopia to the Friars Minor. The story of their vain efforts is very simple and very heroic. An expedition arrives; penetrates into the country; scarcely is its coming recognized than its sentence is banishment or death. Yet the attempt is renewed again and again. There were many martyrdoms, sometimes glorified by heavenly portents.

In 1839 began the apostolic labours of two missionaries peculiarly fitted for their difficult task. These were the Blessed Justin de Jacobis, who worked in the North, and William Massaia (afterwards Cardinal), whose field was the Galle country in the South. Justin de Jacobis belonged to the Congregation of St. Vincent de Paul. He was beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1934, with his convert, of whom there is reference in the next paragraph but one.

Blessed Justin devised for himself a very special plan of action. Clad as a monk, he professed great austerity of life; he preached to the poor, avoided discussions with the clergy, avoided the towns, endeavoured to gain general sympathy, often entered the Coptic churches to pray when no service was proceeding, in order not to be taken for a follower of Mohammed. He thus succeeded in making many converts. He achieved the difficult feat of bringing a party of Copts to visit Rome. The courtesy showed them by the Cardinals, the carriages placed at their disposal for the visiting of the churches, the audience with the Pope - their entire reception impressed them profoundly. No one had invited them to abjure their schism; but they gained a sense that their own Church was far from the true one. One of them, when looking his last on the Eternal City, exclaimed: "If I were not at the head of the embassy, I would never leave Rome."

One of the B. de Jacobis's converts was an Ethiopian monk, Ghebre (or Gabra) Michael. He was put to death for the Faith, and he has been beatified by Pope Pius XI. But there were many other victims of a persecution which was ever ready to break out afresh.

Father Massaia was a Capuchin. His plan was to disguise himself as a physician, and entering the country from Upper Egypt to travel in the Galle region, doing the work of a pioneer of Catholic ideas and practices among populations whose religious conceptions were a mixture of negro paganism, Judaism, Islamism or variations of Mohammed's teachings, and schismatic Christianity. In wild and savage garb, this man, destined one day to wear the cardinalial purple, healed bodies by means often far from refined, but sometimes blessed with miraculous success. Women and children trembled before him and his terrible-looking instruments, but while, outside his tent, he vaccinated or otherwise treated scores of applicants in a single day, he would find time to attend within doors to the spiritual needs of others.

Massaia was a fearless man. On one occasion he was brought with other prisoners in chains before the terrible Negus Theodore II, who was excessively honoured by being called "the African Napoleon," an astute, aggressive and cruel savage. While all around him trembled, Massaia answered with perfect coolness and correctness a number of questions put to him by the monarch. At the end, Theodore turned to the assembly and said: "Know, all of you, that to-day for the first

time Theodore declares he is beaten by a monk. Let that be proclaimed to all the camp, that they may applaud!" Tremendous was the applause that followed. Nor was that the end of the curious incident. Recalling the missionary, for whom some augured a terrible fate, the Negus bowed to him and said: "Forgive me for recalling you. But I wish you before you depart to bless me and this country." Creditable, surely, to Theodore! Yet he was a man capable of massacring thousands of prisoners and burning whole villages, together with their inhabitants.

In spite of such brighter episodes, expulsion ended the apostolic career of both missionaries. Nor had the twenty-one years of the B. de Jacobis, nor the thirty-four of Father Massaia, the happy results that might have been hoped for. Persecution, banishment, burning of churches had become too strong a tradition; every new success brought fresh violence. The Abuna and his Coptic clergy, hardened in opposition to the Catholic Church, were able to rely on the support of the civil power. Besides this, the invasion of Africa and the grasping of its various regions by European Powers contributed to strengthen Ethiopian opposition to whatever was not national. After a crisis of persecution in 1916, Father Baeteman; a Lazarist or Vincentian, carried on his work for a considerable time in the guise of a miller. He set up a mill, ground corn, made butter and cheese, and watched for chance opportunities of making a convert or conferring a baptism.

Since Italy Came.

Now that Italy has imposed her control on Ethiopia with a strong hand, entirely new conditions have arisen.

It is much too soon to write confidently on a question to the answering of which time and experience have yet much to say. But in general the facts and principles that must guide the evangelization seem to be the following:

(1) Theoretical discussion on theological matters, such as the Monophysite heresy, will avail little in the face of ignorance and obstinacy; rather is good-will to be cultivated among all classes by bringing them to appreciate the liturgy of the Church, the learning and high tone of her ministers, the morality and charity of Catholics, clerical and lay. On the colonists, therefore, of every degree, will rest a grave responsibility for the diffusing of "the good odour of Christ."

(2) The Ethiopians are deeply religious, but need deep reform and purification in their mentality and ways of life. For this only the rising generation can be counted on. And so often, the school is the thing - the chief, nay the indispensable, means of conversion. The school, besides repairing old evils, has to avert a new danger; that - namely, of a young generation that, coming into contact with Western civilization, acquires a contempt for the religion of their ancestors, and, confounding all Christianity with ancient fables and superstitions, grows into sheer indifferentism and irreligion. Nor is it to be expected that Red Atheism will be slow in knocking at the doors of Ethiopian huts or halls. [Dear reader, are you praying for the Ethiopians? Look at what has happened since this was written. Ethiopia's Marxist experiment of the 1970's and 80's was one of the cruellest and most heartless in human history.]

(3) There is urgent need of a reformed clergy. But how is it to be obtained? A mass conversion of clergy or laity within a short time is obviously not to be dreamt of. And even if large numbers of the actual clergy were reconciled to the Catholic Church, they would be useless for its purposes. Ought, then, their training to be begun over again? Or ought they be simply excluded from the ministry? Neither suggestion is acceptable.

A New Dawn?

What then remains? To wait! To wait till the missionaries shall have entered on their work, and the schools shall have given vocations; till the new Ethiopian seminary, now standing so close to the Pope's own basilica and palace, and then other seminaries following in its course, shall have sent out new and worthy priests to their native land. Already the Catholic priests in Ethiopia have begun to excite comments such as that recorded of Theodore when he came to know Massaia: "What a difference between this bishop and ours!" Already they are saying: "What a difference between the Roman priests and those that have been raised here or that come to us from Egypt!"

Let us pray for the triumph of the Faith over the dark spectres of schism and heresy that still hold sway over the millions of Ethiopia, for the return to Roman unity and Catholic holiness of a land where Christianity, despite furious assaults, has never faded out since the days of the great Athanasius, but where the patience and heroism of his Catholic successors have never permanently triumphed over the forces of error and disruption.
