

# **St Justin de Jacobis: Founder of the New Catholic Generation and Formator of its Native Clergy in the Catholic Church of Eritrea and Ethiopia**

*by Abba Iyob Ghebresellasie, C.M.  
Province of Eritrea*

## **Introduction**

### **Biblical References to the Introduction of Christianity in the Two Countries**

While historians and archeologists still search for hard evidence of early Christian settlements near the western shore of the Red Sea, it is not difficult to find biblical references to the arrival of Christianity in our area.

*And behold an Ethiopian, eunuch, a minister of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, who was in charge of all her treasurers, had come to Jerusalem to worship.... (Acts 8:27).*

According to ethnologists, the name Ethiopia is attributed to those people who have the same language and culture still living in the Horn of Africa. And although there is no agreement among historians, either about the location of the residence of Queen Candace, or on the boundaries of her territory, there are narratives by native historians that can serve, to some extent, as sources. On the basis of these biblical references and traditional accounts, we can say that the Christian faith was introduced in the coastal areas of Eritrea during the first centuries of Christianity. Origin, the Egyptian Church father, writes: "The Gospel is not said to have been preached to all the Ethiopians especially to those who lived beyond the river."<sup>1</sup>

### **Christianity in the IV Century in Eritrea and in Various Border Regions of Ethiopia**

There is no doubt that the Christian faith was introduced to the Axumite Kingdom through the Eritrean coastal areas near the actual seaport of Massawa, and most probably through the ancient harbor of Adulis. And from Adulis up to Axum, there are many ancient ruins in Eritrea such as Quohaito, Tokonda, Abba Meta, and Metera that offer historical evidence of early Christian presence.<sup>2</sup> Although archeologists began excavating some of these historical sights in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their work was interrupted by the 30-year war for Eritrean independence.

Both Eusebius and Rufinus, historians of the early Church, confirm the arrival of Christianity in Eritrea/Ethiopia. St. Frumentius was consecrated bishop in the Fourth Century by Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, who "bade him return in the grace of God whence he had come." An ancient Ghe'ez Martirology offers more details about Frumentius' mission and ministry as bishop of Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> St. Frumentius was instrumental in the evangelization of the southern plateaus of Eritrea and the nearby northern regions of Ethiopia.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sergew Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa.

<sup>2</sup>Daniele Giotto and Olinto Marinelli, *Risultati Scientifici*, Florence, 1912, p. 470.

<sup>3</sup>Hable-Sellassie, *op. cit.*

## **Later Missionaries Attempted to Restore the Catholic Faith in the Highlands of Eritrea and the Nearby Ethiopian Regions**

C. Conti Rossini, the writer and historian explains how the Ethiopian Church, in its foundation, was a follower of Catholic orthodoxy, as was the Alexandrian Church upon which it depended. The Monophysite Heresy was accepted by the Church of Alexandria, and since Ethiopia received its bishops from Alexandria, the Ethiopian Church, contrary to its origins, also became Monophysite (probably unconsciously). Leaving aside the issue of how the Ethio-Eritrean Church became Monophysite, many Catholic missionaries attempted to regain its followers for the Church of Rome.

Emperor Zarajacob of Ethiopia, accepting the invitation of Pope Eugenius IV, sent Abbot Andrew of St. Antony Monastery in Egypt and a deacon named Peter, as delegates to participate in the Council of Florence in 1441.<sup>4</sup>

From 1555 to 1632, many Jesuit missionaries were sent to Ethiopia to restore the unity of the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, these missionaries had little understanding of the culture and the ecclesiastical and liturgical customs of the Ethio-Eritrean Church, and were eventually driven out of the country altogether. However, during their presence in the area, they gained new members for the Catholic Church. These new Catholics were also persecuted, and many sought refuge in remote areas in order to keep their Catholic faith. Amazingly, they were able to resist for over two centuries, though they were without priests to assist them.

- From 1637 to 1642, Capuchin Friars attempted to enter Eritrea and Ethiopia. But they were arrested and killed by the civil authorities in the area where they entered the country.

- Other Franciscan missionaries tried to enter from 1700 to 1714. They were imprisoned however, and later stoned to death near Gondar.

- The Church of Rome never gave up. An Ethiopian, Ghiorghis Ghebreigziabher, was appointed bishop and given the name Tobia. He was a student of the Propaganda Fide in Rome.<sup>5</sup> He was sent as Bishop of Adulis and arrived in Eritrea with his companion. Both worked hard to establish the Catholic Church once again. However, this time too, Abuna Tobia was forced to leave the country and flee to Cairo in 1797.

## **The Coming of St. Justin de Jacobis to both Eritrea and Ethiopia and his Success in Founding the Catholic Church**

Justin de Jacobis, a Vincentian missionary with a great gift of holiness and understanding, learned from his founder St. Vincent de Paul, one basic conviction: to follow God's Providence. It was Divine Providence that taught Justin how to deal with the people entrusted to him in his new mission. He was quite aware of the Catholic missionaries who for centuries had done their best to establish the Catholic Church in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, but without success. Justin asked God to inspire him with insight about how to win over the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people. And Divine Providence responded, giving Justin a remarkable perspective on his new mission field's culture and traditions. In many ways, Justin anticipated Vatican II's vision of culture and its importance by almost a hundred years. In St. Justin's time it was often difficult for foreign missionaries to accept and live the culture of their mission territory. Providence enabled St. Justin, the

---

<sup>4</sup>Salvatore Pane, *Vita del Beato Giustino De Jacobis*, Naples, 1949, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup>Tobia was born at Debre Mariam Camcam, in the region of Dembia. To him belongs the honor of being the first African bishop in modern times. As the titular Bishop of Adulis, Abune Tobia labored for eight years in Ethiopia. Prior to his episcopal consecration at the insistence of Pope Pius VI, Abune Tobia had taken a vow to retain the use of the Ethiopian rite.

new Apostolic Prefect, to embrace the traditions and culture of the people, and so announce to them the message of the Gospel.

By keeping his heart open to the people, Justin not only was able to win many of them over to him, but also was able to help them open their hearts to God's word. From now on the Catholic Church would become deeply rooted in the lands of Eritrea and Ethiopia, and would soon offer martyrs for the faith. This was due in large part to the farsighted vision of St. Justin and his holiness. He hoped and labored for a Catholic Church with an Ethio-Eritrean face. In this, he succeeded where others had failed. That is why we can affirm that St. Justin de Jacobis is the founder of the new Catholic generation. He, by assimilating all the positive value of his country of adoption, was able to build the structure of the Catholic Church on solid ground. This small community would undergo harassment and persecution. But it would resist and survive.

In his mission of evangelization, St. Justin traveled from place to place. When he decided to establish mission stations, he would entrust their administration to priests and seminarians, while he remained always on the move for new places and new people to evangelize. As soon as he arrived in a new place, Justin would rent one or two "hidmos" (small local residences) for himself and for the people traveling with him. Then he would invite the poor and the common folk to visit him, to talk with him, and to pray with him as well.

As a true man of God, Justin preached the Gospel message in such a simple way that people understood it, and liked him as well. His life was a living example to the people, and so he was able to change, slowly but surely, the unfair image that the people often had of the Catholic Church and of Catholics themselves.

During his twenty years of preaching the Gospel in Eritrea and Ethiopia, St. Justin covered thousands of kilometers visiting large and small villages. Wherever he went, he preached the Good News through words and deeds, and encouraged the small communities he founded to lead lives of integrity and fidelity to their beliefs. In this way, Justin's followers earned a good reputation as well as the respect of ordinary Orthodox believers. Because of the continuous persecutions by the civil and religious authorities, Justin did not gain many disciples. Otherwise he was well accepted everywhere because of his great respect for the people.

### **The First Establishment of the Catholic Community at Adwa**

The years from 1769 to 1855 are known as the "Age of Princes" in the Ethiopian history. There was no central government authority in the northern part of the country. There were only various provincial and regional authorities. In this context, Adwa was an administrative and commercial center. Ubie was its regional prince whose residence was not far from the town of Adwa. By the end of 1839, Adwa had been chosen to be the residence of the newly appointed Apostolic Prefect, Justin de Jacobis. Fremona, on the outskirts of Adwa, had been a center of the Jesuit missionaries some two centuries before Justin's arrival.

De Jacobis gave his first sermon in January 1840. His first efforts aroused mixed feelings as well as admiration for him in the people and the Orthodox clergy of Adwa. It also opened the possibility of gathering together the first Catholic community around him. But, during Justin's absence from Adwa in 1841, Abuna Salama, the newly consecrated Orthodox bishop from Egypt, attempted to uproot this small Catholic community by excommunicating all of its members and its sympathizers. Some of these newly converted persons, afraid of the excommunication which automatically deprived them of the Orthodox sacraments and church burial, abandoned the Catholic faith and formally returned to the Orthodox Church. In spite of this setback however, the faithful of the newly created Catholic community continued to grow steadily. The steady growth of the

community was well known to the fanatical Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities. The prefect was denied access to any space for public worship and he had to celebrate the Holy Mass and confer the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Confession secretly in hidden places.

The Orthodox authorities considered Justin's presence to be a scandal and a sacrilege. He and the Catholic community were denounced to the Orthodox bishop, Abuna Salama. Fortunately, the local prince Ubie greatly respected Justin and so his Orthodox foes were unable to carry out their plans for expelling the Prefect and uprooting the small community he founded. Ubie granted a small territory to St. Justin which included a few nearby villages. This was in compensation for the service he rendered to the delegation which went to Egypt to request a new bishop for Ethiopia.

Adwa was also very near Addi Abun, the residence of the Orthodox bishop. The presence of the Catholic community so near the bishop became intolerable. The other Orthodox authorities also continued their opposition. They treated De Jacobis and his companions badly. And they threatened the newly converted families with excommunication and harassment.

There was no choice for the poor Prefect but to move out of Adwa. Convinced of God's providence, Justin searched for a suitable place to live peacefully and continue his ministry. In 1844, he traveled back to Eritrea and stayed for half a year in Zeazega. He then returned to Agame. Before moving his clergy out of Adwa, he founded a small Catholic community in nearby Enticio. Here, St. Justin was given a piece of land by a delegate of the German government named Mr. Shamir. This gentleman, who had formerly been a Protestant, was received into the Catholic Church by Justin, and married a Catholic woman from the local area. Because of this donation of land, the Prefect was able to build a small house and an oratory, and he appointed a priest to look after the tiny community as well as a "debtera" (a master of liturgical ceremonies) to teach catechism and liturgical music. De Jacobis and his confrere Biancheri decided to move on, but would return now and then to visit the community. In May of 1845 the majority of the priests and seminarians moved to Guala, where in the meantime, St. Justin had bought a piece of land and built Mary Immaculate Seminary.

### **The Presence of the Catholic Community at Adwa**

In 1844 Ghebremikael (Blessed) officially declared his allegiance to the doctrine of the two natures in Christ. From now on, Ghebremikael would accompany Justin in many of his journeys, especially to the famous monastery of Gunda Gunde to the northeast of Guala. De Jacobis was given the name of Abba Yacob-Mariam, or Jacob of Mary, by his followers because of his great devotion to the Blessed Virgin.

The visit of the white Prefect and the highly respected monk Abba Ghebremikael deeply moved the monks of the monastery. Because of the good impression made by Justin and Ghebremikael, a number of the monks began to consider following them to Guala. Abba Teklehaimanot (the elder, to distinguish him from Teklehaimanot the younger who would write the first biography of De Jacobis) was one of the monks who followed them, joining them even on their journey to Eritrea. Teklehaimanot suggested that the Prefect ask permission to buy some land from the villagers of Guala, his hometown. De Jacobis was able to buy a small piece of land near the Orthodox church of St. Ghiorghis (St. George). In 1845, in less than a year, St. Justin built the seminary and transferred both the seminarians and some of his priests from Adwa to Guala. The Prefect also built a house near the seminary for the youth and the adults who came from nearby villages for catechetical instructs. Many children along with their families, were attracted by the Catholic way of life and by the exemplary behavior of the seminarians, and soon joined the Catholic community. Tahtai-Zeban, the parish priest of Maiberazio, to the northeast of Guala, along with his parishioners and those of a another village named Biera, joined the Catholic community of Guala.

St. Justin, in an attempt to resolve the shortage of Catholic priests, planned to send some of his seminarians to Egypt for further training and ordination to the priesthood. However, Guglielmo

Massaia, who would later become cardinal, had just arrived as Apostolic Prefect of the southern part of Ethiopia. He visited Guala in 1846 and the following year ordained new priests and received into the Catholic Church others who had been exercising their priesthood in the Orthodox Church. There were 15 altogether. This event gave tremendous momentum to De Jacobis' apostolic efforts. The new Catholic priests were assigned to different villages and the Catholic faith became more established and began to thrive.

The ministry of the Catholic communities was met by resistance and persecution on the part of some of the Orthodox. Abuna Salama used the threat of excommunication to try to stop Justin's ministry. Salama also sought the intervention of the civil authorities to continue the harassment of the Catholic communities. Soon the Catholics came to be viewed as outcasts and many had their properties confiscated and were expelled from their homes. Confronted with this persecution, some Catholics chose to flee rather than deny their faith. Others remained in their home villages, willing to accept the risks. Some also renounced their newfound Catholic faith and returned to the Orthodox Church. However the Catholic community as a whole remained faithful despite the persecutions, and would transmit its faith to future generations.

### **The Establishment of the Catholic Community at Alitena, among the Irob**

Two years before the transfer of both the priests and the seminarians from Guala to Alitena, there was already a Catholic community established among the Irob Bukneito ethnic group centered around Alitena. Upon their conversion to the Catholic faith, some of the elders of the Irob Bukneito expressed, on behalf of their entire people, their determination to remain committed to Catholicism on the condition that De Jacobis promise to provide them with Catholic priests to meet their spiritual needs.

In 1848, just one year after the ordinations celebrated by the Apostolic Prefect Massaia in Guala, many of the Catholics in Guala were forced to flee to Alitena because of a persecution ordered by Abuna Salama. They were soon followed by the community of Mary Immaculate Seminary. Even though the seminary only existed in Alitena for a few years, the impact on the Catholic community there was remarkable. The community was strengthened by the presence of the seminary and would be able to remain faithful against all odds. However after only one year in Alitena, the seminary began to undergo both internal and external conflicts.

De Jacobis had to return hurriedly from Menkulu near the Red Sea, to address the situation. He went back to see Prince Ubie and sought his help to protect his ministry against Abuna Salama's continuous threats. The success of De Jacobis was short-lived. From Alitena, he appealed to Prince Ubie many times, but his pleas for justice went unheeded. The local authorities repeatedly ransacked the seminary forcing De Jacobis and the seminary community to flee for their own safety. Because of the persecution, in 1851 Justin was obliged to move the seminary once again, this time to Halay in the zone of Aret in the southeastern highlands of Eritrea. He left several priests behind in Alitena to care for the Catholic community.

### **The Catholic Community in the South-Eastern Highlands of Eritrea and Halay**

Beginning in 1850, De Jacobis began providing spiritual assistance to the people of Aret, centered in Halay and the villages of Awhene and Maarda. Because the people welcomed him and his guidance, he assigned Abba Emnetu, one of his priests, to stay in Halay and build a residence there. In 1851, the majority of the priests and seminarians moved from Alitena to Halay. Convinced of the loyalty of the people of Halay, De Jacobis moved westward to the region of Seyah.

In 1849, Justin de Jacobis was consecrated bishop in Massawa by the Apostolic Vicar and future cardinal, G. Massaia. The evangelical simplicity of the ceremony impressed his followers.

Justin was thus able to carry out his ministry, eventually naming Biancheri as his bishop coadjutor and eventual successor. The three Catholic dioceses in Eritrea exist today because of the growth of the Church from the time of its evangelizer and founder, Justin de Jacobis.

### **De Jacobis, Formator of the Native Ethio-Eritrean Clergy**

Many foreign missionaries did their best to transplant the Gospel message and form both Eritrean and Ethiopian Catholics. Some were even martyred because of their response to the Lord's call. Yet they failed to establish the Catholic Church within the cultural context of Ethiopia and Eritrea. De Jacobis was determined not to commit the same mistakes, and was inspired to focus his energies on the formation of native clergy. Because of this, Justin succeeded where others had failed. He is held in such high esteem that even today he is not referred to as "St. Justin," but rather as "our father Justin de Jacobis" by both clergy and laity. This affectionate title is the expression of a deep-felt love for the man who brought them to the Catholic faith.

At the time of Justin de Jacobis' episcopal consecration, the Catholic Church had committed itself to sending as many missionaries as possible throughout the world under the auspices of "Propaganda Fide." Pius IX, who named Justin bishop, did his best to support the missions by constituting hundreds of prefectures, vicariates and dioceses all over the world.

Unfortunately, many European missionaries did not see the need for establishing seminaries for indigenous clergy. Justin de Jacobis was one of the few who experienced and responded to this need. He wrote to his superiors:

*It is more fruitful and successful to deal with the native priests than with the European missionaries who are not familiar with the local and social cultures of the native people.*

Impressed by their intellectual capacity, and their knowledge of their social context, De Jacobis dedicated himself totally to the formation of the native seminarians. The students became convinced of the dedication, love, and availability of their formator. Because of this mutual understanding and respect, the seminarians remained loyal, overcoming all sorts of obstacles and persecution. De Jacobis was able to lay down a strong foundation for the Church by training native priests, an idea that would only be fully appreciated and supported some hundred years after his death. Many missionaries from abroad were convinced of the superiority of their own culture, and were not able to appreciate the culture of the people whom they were sent to evangelize. Despite their hard work, they failed to see the usefulness and practicality of forming local clergy. This attitude handicapped their success in evangelization.

In our case, the native clergy, well prepared by De Jacobis, became the backbone of the Catholic community. During the Second World War, when many foreign missionaries were forced to flee, a good number of Eritrean diocesan priests, at the request of their bishop, Kidanemariam Kassa, rushed to fill the vacuum left by the expulsion of the foreigners in central and southern Ethiopia.

### **St. Justin de Jacobis' Profound Respect for the Native Clergy**

From the moment that De Jacobis set foot in this new country, he became aware of the great respect for the clergy in Ethio-Eritrean society. And he reinforced that respect in all his dealings with them as well. These sentiments are to be found in his first address directed to the Orthodox clergy:

*... As you are priests, so am I. As you are confessors, so am I. As you are preachers of the Gospel, so too am I. Therefore if you permit me to celebrate the Mass, I will. If you permit me*

*to hear confessions, I will. If you let me preach the Gospel, I will. But if you do not want me to, I will not do it.*"<sup>6</sup>

Justin's main opponents all along had been the Orthodox clergy, yet he persistently continued to respect and love them. The doors of his residence were always open to them. He also refused to be engaged in futile theological discussions which would lead nowhere. On the contrary, he never permitted his confreres or his students to criticize them. When the Orthodox clergy permitted him, he was very happy to join them in their prayers and liturgical services. Justin even invited some of the Orthodox to teach his students liturgical music and prayers. Moreover, because of his deep respect and veneration for them, De Jacobis visited many of the monasteries in both countries in order to deepen his knowledge of their formation and their way of life. He also had a keen interest in their methods of exercising the apostolate. He was impressed with the way that the Orthodox Christians responded to the teaching and guidance of their clergy.

Justin's respect was reciprocated in many cases, and he was often welcomed into the liturgical and social gatherings of the Orthodox. He was thus better able to understand their reality. This contact with the clergy also allowed him to meet the people and gain their respect and admiration.

### **Native Priests, Formed by De Jacobis, Became Pillars of the Local Catholic Church**

On the last day of his life, 31 July 1860, just three hours before his death, Justin de Jacobis gathered his disciples around him and told them:

*... Following the example of Our Lord who said good-bye to Our Lady and to his apostles, I say good-bye to you.... Drive far from your house all calumny and bickering, love one another, remain firm in the faith and above all, practice charity. Be the light of your people (Ethiopia).*

He then called the seminarians to his bedside and said:

*Since God has chosen you, be careful to follow the true path. I propose to you as your models the monks. They are good and they are the light which illuminates you. Follow their example.*<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the death of this extraordinary formator and father, there arose a serious disagreement among the missionaries and the native priests. The missionaries wanted to change the whole method used by De Jacobis. But the native priests took an uncompromising stand to remain faithful to the way of life taught to them by their spiritual father, though it would cause them great suffering and isolation. They appealed to the Propaganda Fide, but unfortunately their case went unheeded for quite a long time. They would reflect over and over on the last words of their beloved father and formator. The native clergy went through a very difficult experience in order to remain faithful to De Jacobis. Through their long struggle and bitter sufferings, they remained steadfast in their faith and in their devotion to their father and educator, Justin de Jacobis.

In this way his disciples, both in Eritrea and Ethiopia, committed themselves to be the light and the foundation of their local Church. Even today, despite being a minority, the Catholic Church is playing a major role in the areas of education, healthcare and human promotion. Certainly all this is due to the proper inculturation of the Gospel message. Though the Gospel had been introduced in the first evangelization, it took root and spread with the reintroduction of the Catholic faith by St. Justin de Jacobis: tireless Apostle of Abyssinia, today the countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

---

<sup>6</sup> Abba Teklehaumnot, *The Life of Abuna Jacob*, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Mahoney, *The Ebullient Phoenix*, Vol. I, pp. 213-215.