

Justin De Jacobis: the Art of Dialogue

*by Professor Yaqob Beyené**

Justin De Jacobis, the missionary, did not head off to an African country to preach the Gospel to the pagans, but went into a Christian country to unite the Christians of the African country with the Christians of Rome. I would like, therefore, first of all to say a few introductory words on Ethiopia, this African country of the Christian-Orthodox religion.

Ethiopia is the country formerly known in the West by the name Abyssinia, the name also used by Justin in his diary. Then, later on, precisely because of the influence of Christianity, it became known under the name Ethiopia.¹ It is an African country, but we are dealing with a country with a history completely different from that of the other countries of Africa. This is because, not only did it never experience the yoke of colonialism, but also, and above all, because it is the continuation of the well-known Kingdom of Aksum, a kingdom which, in the period of its greatest splendour (c. 325), had accepted the new religion, Christianity, which has had a decisive influence on its historical-cultural development. Ethiopia is a country in which Christianity has been, for centuries, the strongest reason for its national unity, the country in which Christianity suckled, and saw to the conservation and transmission of, everything which characterises and distinguishes its inhabitants, who are of the Christian-Orthodox faith, from other Africans.

Ethiopia is a country whose Christian religion, identified with national feeling against the threats of invasion by people of a different religion, has strongly contributed to maintaining the independence of the country itself, in which Christianity was the official religion up until 1974.²

At present Ethiopia is a country where Christianity is taken to the point of blending with and identifying itself with national feeling against any external aggressor whatsoever. To sum up, Ethiopia is the country which Christianity transformed into an island, originally in the sea of paganism and now in that of Islam, a Christian island which has sought contacts with Christian countries and has succeeded in creating permanent bonds with the Mediterranean culture and civilization.³

In order to convey some idea of the huge difficulties which Justin De Jacobis had to face in his missionary activity, I feel it necessary to sketch out briefly a picture of the political and cultural situation in Ethiopia as it was in his time.

*Born in Ethiopia, is ordinary professor of Amharic Language and Literature in the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples, and has written several books on Ethiopian cultural themes and theology.

¹The Ethiopians adopted the name Ethiopia for their country because they wanted to claim for themselves, for reasons of national pride, the numerous references to Ethiopia in the Bible.

²This is the year in which Christianity lost its special favourable position as "State religion" because of the activity of the revolutionary military who seized power.

³In order to grasp this all that is needed is to reflect on the pilgrimage which Ethiopian Christians used to make to Palestine, and the establishment of Ethiopian communities along the Mediterranean coastline from Jerusalem to Lebanon, to Cyprus, to Rome, which kept up, through all the centuries, cultural contacts with the West and the Near East.

In 1270 Yekunno Amlak overthrew the Zagwe dynasty and established the so-called Salomonide dynasty. At the same time he moved the Ethiopian capital from Lasta, on the border of southern Tigray, to Sewa territory further south. But here his successors found themselves in a situation which forced them into war with the southern Moslem states, a war which the Christians won, but which lasted, although with interruptions, approximately from 1333 till 1577. The final campaign, which was the most bitter one and is known as the “Gragni War” (the “Left-Handed or Dirty Tricks,” War), was won by the Christians of Ethiopia but with the deciding influence of Portuguese soldiers.

The Portuguese and the Jesuit missionaries, missionaries who came to Ethiopia to collect the payment due because of the help which the Portuguese soldiers had given, were expelled (1632). This payment was the transfer of the Ethiopian people from the Christian-Orthodox faith to the Catholic faith. After this expulsion Ethiopia turned in on itself, beginning an isolation which would last for centuries and which carried the burden of hostility, by now showing itself generally against everything European, but especially against Catholics, who had tried to replace its long cultural tradition with the Latin one.

When the long war between Christians and Moslems was over the Ethiopian State found it had to confront the Oromo invaders, and move its capital to Gondar, in the province of Dambya. Then, after a whole series of events, it arrived, in the second half of the 18th century, at a period known as *zamana masafent* (the era of the princes), in which the *ras*, the great feudal lords of the different Ethiopian regions, affirmed more and more openly their independence from the Salomonide sovereigns, who, becoming more and more powerless, were by now mere puppet emperors.

That was the country’s political situation when Justin De Jacobis arrived in Ethiopia.

Moreover, when Justin arrived not only was the political situation difficult, but the ecclesiastical one also was. The situation in the Church was defined by theological disputes about the unction of Christ. This question was discussed by theologians, and often used to provoke bloody encounters which, in Ethiopia, for centuries did not make any clear distinction between social and religious problems, nor between political and theological conflicts. To clarify that situation we must keep in mind that up till 1974 the spiritual and temporal power in Ethiopia, that is Church and State, were merged and so penetrated each other that, as a result, there was only one single moral entity.

The Ethiopian schools of theology were divided into three distinct traditions:

- a. The Karra school, which was followed by almost all the monasteries of present-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea.
- b. The Yasaga-Leg school, followed by most of the monasteries of the Sewa region.
- c. The Qebat school, followed by most of the monasteries of the Goggiam region.

Given that there were these three schools of theology which, with the passage of time, became real and distinct politico-religious parties, the Emperor was forced, by the circumstances at any given moment, to proclaim the Christology taught by one of them as the official religion of his kingdom, to the clear disadvantage of the other two. And it must be noted that, not infrequently, following the proclamation of the official doctrine of the Ethiopian State there came severe punishment, including the death penalty, against the principal exponents of the other schools of theology.

Justin De Jacobis arrived in Ethiopia in 1839 and decided to take up residence in Adwa, a small city famous for its obvious hostility towards Europeans, whether Catholic or Protestant. His choice was probably not just because of ease of communications with Massawa and his wish to preserve “the first seeds of Catholic truth,” as Justin himself wrote in his diary, but was also a rational choice.⁴

Adwa is, in fact, situated about 15 kilometers from Aksum, the holy city of all Ethiopians, the cradle of Ethiopian civilization, the city to which Christianity had come in the 4th century, the seat of the mother church of all the ecclesiastical provinces of the country, a church in which, up until the end of the 19th century, all the Emperors of Ethiopia were crowned and received the sanction of the national Church. As well as this, Adwa is close to Framona, the area where the Jesuits had established their residence in the 17th century and which, after they had been expelled, became Addi-Abun and therefore the residence of the Metropolitan of Ethiopia. Besides, one has to bear in mind that Adwa is located in the geographical region in which the well-known Nine Saints, called “Roman” because they came into Ethiopia from the Eastern Roman Empire, had preached the Gospel, reformed customs, spread ascetic practices, and founded monasteries.⁵

We do not know the real reason why Adwa was selected by Justin as his first residence, but we cannot, however, exclude the fact that the saint had preferred it either because of the historical reasons briefly summarised above or because it was a place which allowed him to have easy contact with the people who were the real custodians and channels of traditional Ethiopian culture; namely, the monks who lived in the many monasteries in the surrounding countryside.

It is a well known fact that Ethiopia has always been very hostile towards missionaries, so it is quite legitimate to ask ourselves this question: Why was it that Justin De Jacobis, an ordinary priest, had such success as to earn the title of “founder” of the Ethiopian Catholic Church of the Alexandrian Rite, while both the missionaries who were his predecessors and those who were his contemporaries failed totally? My personal opinion is that there is, in fact, no difficulty in answering that question. It is a certain fact, known to us, that those others failed spectacularly – and continue on failing, even today – because they have tried, and are still trying, to make the Ethiopian Christians convert to Catholicism by:

- a. not entering into dialogue, but getting involved in useless and sterile discussions, without taking into account that Ethiopian theological dialectic is not based on rational reasoning but on continually quoting from Scripture, opposing the opponent’s quotations, in support of one’s own thesis, a form of dialectic totally different from the Western form;
- b. replacing Christianity of the Oriental tradition, which is the Ethiopian form, with Western Christianity, which is, of course, the Christianity of the missions;
- c. imposing the Latin Rite in place of the Ethiopian one, which is an appropriate rite for the local culture;
- d. forbidding respect for local usages and customs, by imposing Western ones.

⁴As regards the choice of Adwa, Justin says in his diary that it was chosen “because of communications with Massaua, and because of not wanting to lose the first seeds of the Catholic truth sown by Fr Sapeto.” G. De Jacobis, *Scritti I. Diario*, Frascati 2000, p. 31. NB: From now on this will be cited as “Diary.”

⁵Diary, pp. 406-407.

Justin De Jacobis, on the other hand, succeeded in achieving marvelous results because, being a man of simplicity, he understood well that:

- a. it was not possible to bring about unity among Christians by means of theological debate, but only by initiating religious dialogue which was frank and open, and based, first of all, on respect for the other;
- b. he was going to have to respect Christianity of the Oriental tradition, such as the Ethiopian, as it was;
- c. he was going to have to use the Ethiopian Rite;
- d. he was going to have to follow usages and customs of the country, apart from those which, in his opinion, were clearly contrary to Gospel teaching.

Now let us have a more detailed look at Justin's art of dialogue.

Justin De Jacobis and the Theological Discussions

Justin De Jacobis, in his first talk or, as the Ethiopians would say, his *manfasawi Cewewet* (spiritual dialogue), which he gave on 26 January 1840 in the Amharic language to some clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, did not say "I am here before you so that we can discuss the theological problems which divide your Church from that of Rome." No, what he did say was "The mouth is the door to the heart. Speaking is the heart's key. When I open my mouth I unlock the heart's door. When I speak to you I hand you the key to [my] heart. Come in and see that the Holy Spirit has planted in my heart [...] a great love for the Ethiopian Christians."⁶ We see, now, that Justin speaks of his love for the Ethiopian Christians, love which the Holy Spirit has caused "to live in him" as the Amharic text has it, but he avoids the usual theological discussions. It is as if he has taken into account that Catholics involved in theological dialectic had been labelled, by the Ethiopian experts of the 17th century, as "dissimulators,"⁷ and also that an important Ethiopian theologian of the first half of the 15th century, Giyorgis of Sagla, at the end of discussions with a Venetian, had declared that "the malice of the wiles (*min*)" of the sons of Leo is greater than the amount of sand on the banks of the River Ghion (the Blue Nile)."⁸

When Tigrina-speaking Ethiopians want to say that someone is not sincere they say *lebbu ayyeheben*, which means "he does not give his heart." When Justin said to the educated Ethiopians "When I speak to you I hand to you the key to [my] heart," they certainly understood that our saint intended to say that he had not made use of what they themselves accuse Catholic missionaries of using, namely "dissimulation and malice," but that he was sincere with them. As well as that, Justin, in my opinion, was not the sort of man who, in

⁶It should be noted that the talk was written in Amharic, as is indicated in the diary itself. The Italian and Amharic versions are substantially the same, but there are some differences; for example, the Amharic text does not say "the door," but "the mouth"; also it does not say "planted" but "has caused to live, to inhabit." I have, however, preferred to cite the Italian text rather than the Amharic, because I think it indicates better what Justin wanted to say. For the Amharic text see *Gadla Abuna Yaqob* (unpublished manuscript), p. 162.

⁷E. Cerulli: "Mazgaba haymanot" and "Maseheta Lebuna," in *Scritti teologici etiopici dei secoli XVI-XVII*, II, Città del Vaticano 1960; ts. p. 11, tr. p. 77; ts. p. 156, tr. p. 182.

⁸Yakob Beyene, Giyorgis of Sagla, "Il Libro del Mistero (Masehafa Mesetir)" in *CSCO, Scriptores Aethiopici*, TT. 89-90, parte prima, Lovanii 1990, ts. p. 413, tr. p. 258.

order to avoid admitting that he is wrong, resorts to sophism and malice. We know for a fact that when he made a mistake he used to admit his error publicly and ask forgiveness.⁹

There is a saying in the Tigrina language: *Lebbi waddi sab ketfallet, benatka gemmer*, which means “to know the heart of a nation, begin with your own”. Justin well understood his own heart.

But let us get back to his first talk. After he had said, among other things, that in this country he no longer had anyone except God alone and his “dear Abyssinian Christian,” and that now those who were there to listen to his talk were his parents and friends, he went on to say: “I am a priest like yourselves; I am a confessor like yourselves”. It is to be noted that Justin, unlike his predecessors and some of his influential contemporaries, asserted that he considered them priests equal in dignity with himself, and that for him their priesthood was valid.

And then Justin, after saying that he was “a Christian from Rome who loved the Abyssinian Christians,” rounded off his talk by asking whether in the four months he had spent in Ethiopia he had ever done anything which might have caused scandal,¹⁰ and by promising to be their friend and servant.¹¹

He gave a second talk to the same group who had been there for his first. He spoke at length about the unity of Christians, about St. Peter and St. Mark, stressing that the Pope was the successor of St. Peter and that the Patriarch of Alexandria was the successor of St. Mark. He then went on: “I have come [...] to tell you that the Christians of Rome wish to join the Christians of Abyssinia, they want to love them, they want to be their brothers.”¹² It is to be noted that Justin does not speak of “conversion,” but rather of “union,” and that the wording “the Christians of Rome wish to join the Christians of Abyssinia,” spoken by a Catholic monk, by one of the sons of Leo, precisely of that Pope Leo whom Justin’s listeners had always called regum (accursed), would certainly have made a deep impression in the hearts of those who were listening to him.

Justin and Ethiopian Christianity

Justin believed firmly in the unity of Christians in faith, and used to invite Ethiopian priests to preach, along with him, one sole faith, one sole love and one sole Church.¹³ I have never heard anyone say, nor have I read, that Justin ever defined Ethiopian Christianity by using expressions such as “Christianity in name only, in appearance only, without significance; Christianity from mere habit, devoid of results stemming from either faith or conviction; Christianity which, if deprived of the outward observance of certain practices, would have nothing left,” and such like. Now if Justin had that sort of opinion of Ethiopian Christianity, was it likely that he would have said, precisely to the clergy of that Church, that “the Christians of Rome wish to join the Christians of Abyssinia”? Is it likely that he would

⁹Takla-Haymanot (*abba*, di Adwa), *Gadla Abuna Yaqob*, ts. Ge’ez. II parte, pp. 29-30. This work, written by Justin’s most favoured disciple, *abba* Takla-Haymanot from Adwa, is still unpublished.

¹⁰Justin wrote in his diary about the missionaries and scandals: “Missionaries must take care to be on their guard against thinking that the Abyssinians can be attracted, like savage tribes, by spectacle and frivolities. On the contrary, they expect to see seriousness, sacred learning and an exemplary lifestyle in anyone who puts himself forward as a minister of religion.” See p. 486.

¹¹Diary, pp. 81-82.

¹²Diary, p. 84.

¹³Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, Amharic ts., p. 177. This huge work is still unpublished.

have invited them to preach, along with himself, “one sole faith, one sole love and one sole Church”? I think not. The above-mentioned negative judgement of Ethiopian Christianity was given in writing, not by an ordinary Catholic priest like Justin, but by an eminent Catholic prelate, Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia¹⁴ who, during Justin’s time, was developing missionary activity in southern Ethiopia.¹⁵

Justin and the Ethiopian Rite

A little book entitled *L’Ordinario e Quattro Anafore della Messa Etiopica* [The Ordinary and Four Anaphoras of the Ethiopian Mass], published in Rome in 1969, contains on page 5 of the Preface, the following assertion: “The various oriental rites, among which is the Ethiopian, although they differ from each other and from the Latin in non-essential matters, have several parts in common which indicate the same liturgical origin: these are the offertory rites, the liturgy of the word, with the proclamation of the Creed at the centre, the *Pater noster*, the Preface dialogue and the *Sanctus*, culminating in the consecration, etc. The diversity of the non-essential elements is linked to the first evangelization of each group of people which assimilated Christianity according to its own culture, as appears clear from the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia in the middle of the 4th century, etc.” And further on, on pages 7 and 8, the following appears: “The Ethiopian liturgy, which came to birth in times of insurmountable difficulties because of the continuous centuries-old wars in defence of the faith, respected the strong characteristics and the deeply-felt religious convictions of its people. It has remained unchanged for centuries, both in its structure and in its language, and has never been revised, even in the post-conciliar liturgical renewal. Because of this, by studying it we can discover the most authentic traditions of Christian antiquity from the first centuries.” I fully agree with these words written in 1969 by *abba* Adhanom Se’elu, at that time vice-rector of the Pontifical Ethiopian College.

As has been already said, when Justin arrived in Adwa in 1839 he began going to Ethiopian Orthodox churches to pray, to be present at the functions which were being celebrated there, including the Eucharistic liturgy. This provoked curiosity, interest and sympathy among the Orthodox clergy. In this way he brought about friendly chats about the faith, and not the discussions which were so dear to educated Ethiopians.¹⁶ From these dialogues and from his frequent presence at religious functions, Justin understood immediately that he did not have to teach the Ethiopians new dogmas, new morality, new liturgy, but to promote union between the Ethiopian Christians of the Orthodox faith and the Christians of Rome of the Catholic faith. With this aim in mind he engaged in dialogue with educated people who could follow his line of argument, and he spoke about Christian faith by starting from the Ethiopian books of Sacred Scripture, which he knew well.¹⁷ In that way, with the help of his new friends, he came to the conclusion that in the prayers of the Ethiopian

¹⁴G. Massaia, *I miei trentacinque anni di missione nell’alta Etiopia*, I, Milano 1885, p. 60.

¹⁵And this was far from the cultural centres of Ethiopian Christianity; he was a missionary in pagan Ethiopia and Moslem Ethiopia, not in Christian Ethiopia.

¹⁶I would say that Justin understood the innate dialectical capacity of the Ethiopian. In fact he wrote in his diary: “The Abyssinian talent, like that of all orientals, is naturally dialectical, right down to the smallest herdsmen.” See p. 558.

¹⁷For an Ethiopian, a rational lecture which is not based on texts of scripture is philosophical, not theological. That is why Ethiopian theologians assert that anyone who engages in dialogue and discusses religion without bringing in support from Sacred Scripture and the Church Fathers, merely engages in *maballat* talk, “like a widow, a religious woman, a nun.” See I. Guidi, “Annales Johannes I, Iyasu I et Bakaffa,” in *CSCO, Script. Aeth.*, T.V., Paris 1905, ts. p. 82.

there was nothing displeasing to the Lord¹⁸. He therefore decided to allow his new disciples to continue their own devotions, even after they had accepted the Catholic faith. He left the priests free to celebrate Mass, making use of their liturgical books as they were, without any changes, without asking – something very important – that they be ordained a second time in the Latin Rite.¹⁹ Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia, who did not agree with Justin's attitude towards questions of rite, but who did not dare to criticise him openly, wrote the following: "The people of Guala [i.e., Guwala], declared themselves Catholic along with their clergy attached to St John's church, continue to participate at the celebrations of their priests, believing them to be validly ordained. And we were obliged to put up with this abuse for a while and leave them a bit longer in their good faith."²⁰

Massaia had been instructed to conduct ordinations in the Latin Rite on condition that the priests would remain in the Ethiopian Rite. And in 1847, when he was in Guwala itself, he ordained more than ten priests secretly, at Justin's request, in a small chapel.²¹ That is how the Catholic clergy of the Ethiopian Rite originated, brought about by our St. Justin De Jacobis' art of dialogue.

Missionaries, both those who have already developed their activity in Ethiopia and those who today are developing it, may be divided into followers of Justin and followers of Massaia, or those in favour of the Ethiopian Rite and those against it. It is sad to see that, as a result of this division, the Catholics of the one Catholic Church of Ethiopia are divided into those of the Ethiopian Rite and those of the Latin Rite. And this is most embarrassing. But even more embarrassing is the fact that some European Catholic bishops of the Latin Rite, members of the Episcopal Conference of Ethiopia, were not ashamed to present to that Conference, in February 1986, a project for establishing a "liturgy adapted to the Ethiopian people," merging the two existing liturgies, Latin and Ethiopian.²² Since those who proposed the establishment of this hybrid rite did not know the Ethiopian liturgical language, it is hard to understand how they had come to make a judgement on a rite which they did not know.

Justin and Ethiopian usages and customs

As indicated above, Justin wanted to do all he could to avoid causing any scandal to Christian Ethiopia. He therefore made the decision to respect the usages and customs of the country, apart from those which were in obvious contradiction with Gospel teaching. It seems useful to me, therefore, to indicate briefly some of these, but only as samples, in order to understand more clearly the significance of Justin's decision.

1. Dietary prohibitions

As the tradition about the civil and religious history of Ethiopia is linked to the historical content of Sacred Scripture, so the old dietary prohibitions of Christian Ethiopia are no different from those laid down in the Old Testament, especially those in chapter 11 of

¹⁸For his teacher of liturgy Justin had a *dabtara* named Walda-Sellase. See pages 827, 843-844.

¹⁹In Karan in Eritrea in 1890, and in Asmara in 1913, Ethiopian Rite missals were published for Ethiopian Catholics, which did not respect the true tradition of the Ethiopian liturgy. Since these missals had been modified to adapt them to classical western theology, they aroused difficult and contentious debate.

²⁰G. Massaia, *op. cit.*, I, p. 68, and also *Lettere e scritti minori*, vol. V, Roma 1977, p. 386, where the Ethiopian Rite is labelled "informe aborto" [shapeless abortion].

²¹Diary, p. 795.

²²Habtemichael-Kidane, "L'Ufficio divino della Chiesa etiopica," in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 257, Roma 1998, p. 38, nt. 8.

Leviticus.²³ We are talking about very severe restrictions which are observed very zealously by Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christians, and which, in their general lines, correspond to those observed by Jews. They are very faithfully observed, and not just in order to avoid violating Jewish laws. There are two reasons for this, closely linked to one another. The first is that Ethiopians are very proud of their own traditions and would never dare violate any of the dietary prohibitions handed down for centuries from one generation to the next, and which are deeply rooted in the heart and mind of each Ethiopian and Eritrean Christian. And if someone, overcoming his own psychological blockage – helped on of course by Western culture – actually eats what is forbidden by tradition, he would be gradually excluded from the community life of his village, and that would mean his total destruction as a member of the society in which he lives.

The second reason, and I would say the main one, stems from the traditional doctrinal position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And its opinion is that nothing can be added to or taken from what has been laid down in Sacred Scripture and the first three ecumenical councils. And so it holds that none of the Pentateuchal laws have been abrogated by the New Testament. In affirming this it declares that Jesus Christ is the one who gave both the Law to Moses and the keys to St. Peter, and who said “I did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets but to put them into practice,”²⁴ and who said “I have not brought another law which contradicts the old one.”²⁵ It is possible, therefore, that Justin was either alerted by his friends and disciples, who were educated Ethiopians, to the fact that Ethiopians of the traditional culture could not possibly be Christians and not observe the laws of God laid down in both the New and the Old Testaments, just as they are, without any revision or *aggiornamento*.²⁶

2. Meat slaughtered by Moslems

Ethiopian history is characterised by constant confrontation between Christians and Moslems, with forced conversions by both parties and destruction of churches and mosques.²⁷ For Christians, one of the dietary prohibitions present in Ethiopia concerns meat slaughtered by Moslems, and for Moslems meat slaughtered by Christians. Such a prohibition, rigidly observed today by both parties, is clear evidence of the difficult problems in human relations confronting believers of both religions in this part of Africa. For anyone violating such prohibitions the consequences are very grave because, for a Christian, eating meat slaughtered by Moslems is the equivalent of accepting Islam, and vice versa. I do not know what happens to a Moslem who became a Christian by violating this prohibition if he repents and returns to his original faith; but for a Christian who became a Moslem by eating meat slaughtered by Moslems, the Ethiopian Church, with re-baptism being out of the question, has recourse to the

²³It is to be noted that the attitude of the Orthodox Christians of Ethiopia corresponds exactly with that of the Christians of the earliest period. Nevertheless, on the Ethiopian usages and customs of biblical origin see E. Ullendorf *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London 1968, and *The Two Zions. Reminiscences of Jerusalem and Ethiopia*, London 1988.

²⁴Mt 5:17-18, Lk 16:17.

²⁵Mt 5:17.

²⁶For this reason the Ethiopian Orthodox Church holds that it is necessary to observe all the Mosaic teaching, apart from the few matters which were abrogated by the Apostles on the basis of the authority conferred on them by Jesus Christ in person. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church the abrogated Jewish matters are, for example, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, of the Trumpets, of the Sheaves, sentence of death by stoning, the Levitical priesthood, etc. See Yaqob Beyene, Ghiorghis di Sagla, *Il Libro del Mistero. cit.*, TT. 97-98, Lovanii 1993, ts. p.107, tr. p. 65.

²⁷For the history of conflict between Christians and Moslems you are referred to: Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, Oxford 1972; J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London 1976; J. Cuoq, *L'Islam en Ethiopie des origines au XVI siècle*, Paris 1981; P. Marrassini, *Lo scettro e la croce*, I.U.O., Napoli 1993.

rite of reconciliation, with readings, prayers, sprinkling and anointing, in exactly the same manner as for renegades who return from Islam to Christianity.²⁸ Justin himself explains why it is absolutely forbidden for Christians to eat meat slaughtered by Moslems, and for Moslems to eat meat slaughtered by Christians. In fact he wrote in his diary: “The Christian would never inflict the mortal blow to, for example, a cow or sheep or any other animal whose flesh they intended to eat, without first invoking the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God. Briefly, the Abyssinian Christian never kills an animal without making profession of belief in the Trinity of divine Persons in God. In the same way the Moslem, for his part, never kills without saying: ‘There is no God but God, and Mahomet is his prophet.’ So, the killing of an animal in order to eat its meat is considered here to be an act of religion, a profession of faith, a sort of sacrifice, in which others are not allowed to participate unless they are of the same belief.”²⁹

It is to be noted that in Christian Ethiopia a person who eats meat without being concerned as to whether it was slaughtered by Moslems or Christians is considered to be a person of no faith at all. And in actual fact the Protestants and some of Justin’s companions who used to eat any sort of meat without checking by whom it was slaughtered were considered to be men of no faith. With regard to this matter Justin himself has passed on to us in writing what Ethiopian priests and monks of Tara-Emni, in Saraya, said to him: “[...] a new generation of white men who had appeared among us, which is neither Christian nor Moslem, nor even pagan; people who if they were asked what sort of religion they belonged to, answer you: ‘God’s religion,’ yet meanwhile they eat indifferently meat of animals slaughtered either by Christians or Moslems.”³⁰

Justin, then, obviously understood that a religion taught by someone who is considered to be a person without any religious faith would not be welcomed in Ethiopia by either Orthodox Christians or Moslems. In fact when he learnt that the inhabitants of Akkala Guzay, in the south eastern part of present day Eritrea, were scandalized because Fr Biancheri used to eat meat, indifferent to whether it was slaughtered by Christians or Moslems, he was very depressed and felt obliged to write to Rome for advice on how to handle this serious problem. As a result a letter arrived in which missionaries were forbidden to eat meat slaughtered by Moslems. As a result of this [Lorenzo] Biancheri [CM], who did not agree with Justin not only on the question of meat but also on the attitude to adopt in relations with the Orthodox clergy, asked, and received, permission to separate himself from Justin and to go into Moslem territories.³¹

3. *Justin De Jacobis and Fasting*

It is well known that Ethiopians have a lively and strongly-rooted faith. There is plenty of evidence for this in the many religious practices such as frequent, lengthy and rigorous fasts which are so exactly observed, and which are by no means easy to observe.³² It is necessary to emphasise that the Ethiopian fast does not mean just avoiding food from animals, such as dairy products, eggs and meat, but also involves not eating anything before three

²⁸The rite in question is that contained in the well known *Mashaffa-Qedar* “The Book of Purifications,” drawn up precisely for this eventuality.

²⁹Diary, p. 483. See also p. 371.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. Amarico, pp. 159-160, 744-745.

³²There are 250 fast days in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, of which 180 are obligatory, the others being voluntary. See *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa 1970, pp. 63-65. The 250 fast days, however, are observed only by the clergy and older people.

o'clock in the afternoon. Because of this, Mass is never celebrated before that time on fast days.³³

Justin, as is known, did not have good health. In spite of that, in order to avoid scandal,³⁴ he observed all the fast days, including those of the Latin Rite Church.³⁵ Because of this, seeing the problems of continuing his missionary activity if he observed all the fasts, his request for permission to observe only the Ethiopian fast days was granted by Rome.³⁶

4. Divorce

We have already stated that Justin observed all the Ethiopian usages and customs, apart from those contrary to Gospel teaching. Divorce, certainly, is one of those which Justin always opposed.

Among the Amharic and Tigrina speaking Orthodox Christian Ethiopians divorce has existed from time immemorial, because in Christian Ethiopia and Eritrea there exist two sorts of marriage, civil and religious. The civil marriage is celebrated during the wedding banquet before all the guests, with witnesses and guarantors, in the presence of the spiritual father of the family which is being established. This is a real and definite contract by agreement between two families, an agreement which can be rendered null only by a new marriage. This type of marriage can be dissolved.

The religious marriage, on the other hand, is indissoluble, and is contracted, as a rule, in church, and the union is consecrated by the two parties receiving Eucharistic communion. The marriage bond consecrated in this way is the most rigid known in the Orthodox Christian religion in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and cannot be dissolved as easily as the other. In fact it calls for a more moderate lifestyle on the part of the married couple. For this reason, religious marriage is mainly chosen by lay people after the couple have lived together for a long time in the normal civil marriage.

For Justin, marriage, obviously, is one and indissoluble, and he never desisted from upholding this in all circumstances, whether in private or in public. And in the *gadele*, the biography of our saint written in Amharic, from which we have already quoted many times, we read of the following incident which caused uproar. When the Catholics of the area around Adigrat, in present-day north eastern Eritrea, were becoming very numerous, Justin did not have the manpower to cover the problem of religious education. He decided to recruit someone well known for his wide religious learning, and to entrust to him the teaching of religion. He heard that in Tara-Emni, in Saraya, there was a famous teacher called Mabraq Walda Sellase, and he had him invited to Guwala, in Agama, a few kilometers east of Adigrat, where Justin had built the first Ethiopian Catholic seminary of the Ethiopian Rite, and he took him on at a clearly stated annual salary. Mabraq Walda Sellase, while he was living in Guwala was in a second marriage with a woman there, and he became a Catholic. When Justin discovered that the teacher had already been married to an Amharic woman when he

³³Diary, pp. 560-561. N.B. in the Diary, on page 44, we find: "On Christmas Eve [...] all Abyssinians eat meat; on the following day, a fast day for them, it would be gravely scandalous to eat fat." This is definitely a *lapsus*. In actual fact, Christmas Eve is a fast day for Ethiopians; on the other hand, Christmas Day, even when it falls on a Wednesday or Friday, is never a fast day.

³⁴In Ethiopia a monk who did not observe the fast would be considered not merely not a monk but not even a good Christian.

³⁵Fasting not only on Wednesday, but also on Friday and Saturday.

³⁶Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts amarico, p. 159; ts Ge'ez, II parte, pp. 54-55.

was living in Dambeya, in Begameder, told him that, according to the Gospel, marriage was indissoluble and that, to live in the Christian manner he was obliged to leave the second woman. So the teacher accepted Justin's advice; he left the second woman, and lived by himself, guaranteeing, though, the money necessary for the upbringing of the children. This caused amazement and perplexity to everyone.³⁷

It is well known that Justin conquered the hearts of the Ethiopians, who willingly proclaimed him a saint before his beatification in Rome. This was not because of his theological dialectic, which he correctly avoided, but because of his art of dialogue, based on unconditional love for his neighbour, because of his not lining himself up with the *ras* and the big feudal lords, but with the poor, the marginalised and the sick, because of his deep humility, and his living among the Ethiopians like an Ethiopian monk. To sum up, Justin conquered the hearts of the Ethiopians by his authentically Christian behaviour.

I would like to end this article by quoting some comments made by some of those who opposed the saint, not because of his behaviour but because of his Catholic faith, a faith which threatened to replace the Orthodox faith which was the state religion.

1. Emperor Teodoro II, who wanted to unify Ethiopia under one crown and one faith, the Orthodox faith, said about Justin: "If I had had *Abuna Yaqob* with me I would have easily have achieved success."³⁸ And after Justin had been expelled from Gondar, at that time the Ethiopian capital, this same Teodoro II (1855-1868), when he sent Abuna Salama in chains up onto a mountain where he was to remain a prisoner, said to him: "It is you, the Egyptian, who have caused me to be in opposition to my friend Abuna Yaqob."³⁹
2. Abuna Salama III, a friend of the Protestants and definitely an enemy of Justin, said: "*Yaqob, sadeq naw hatiatun ayscescegem*" (Jacobis is a good man, he does not conceal his sins").⁴⁰
3. Orthodox people who had first hand acquaintance with him, but who did not become Catholics, when speaking about Justin, said: "*Haymanotu Kefu nat engi megbarus malkam nat*" (his faith is wrong, but his life is good).⁴¹
4. Ahmad Ara, the leader of the Moslems who escorted the body of St. Justin De Jacobis for four days from Aligade, through Addi-Kayeh and Massaua, towards Hebo, in Akkala Guzay, going against the Islamic tradition of not carrying a Christian body, and who ordered both the resident Asawerti and the nomads, who were Moslems, and the Orthodox Christian travellers, to carry the bier as far as Hebo, said: "*Yom tanasta dabra sedeq wameskayomu lanadayan walaghefuan*" (Today the mountain of truth has collapsed, the refuge of the poor and the marginalised).⁴²

When I was a young philosophy student the late Professor Cornelio Fabbro told us: "If the missionaries had followed the methods of the communists the whole world would be Catholic today." And I also say that if the missionaries who spread their activity had followed the method, that is the art of dialogue, of St. Justin De Jacobis, all Ethiopia would have already become Catholic.

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)

³⁷Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. amarico, pp. 443-445.

³⁸Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. Ge'ez, II parte, p. 49.

³⁹Yaqob Beyene, Fesseha Ghiorghis, *Storia d'Etiopia*, I.U.O., Napoli 1987, ts. P. 87, tr. p. 213.

⁴⁰Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. amarico, p.720.

⁴¹Takla-Haymanot, (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. amarico, p. 161.

⁴²Takla-Haymanot (*abba*), *op. cit.*, ts. Ge'ez, II parte, p. 87.