

# Devotion to St. Justin de Jacobis in Eritrea<sup>1</sup> and Ethiopia<sup>2</sup>

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In speaking about devotion to St. Justin I should say in advance that this refers in a special way to the Catholics in Eritrea and in some areas of Ethiopia. As is well known, St. Justin's apostolate was mainly in the country which at one time was known as Abyssinia, but which today is two countries, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

## 1. Christianity before St. Justin's evangelization

The first Christian seed was planted along the Eritrean coast in the first century,<sup>3</sup> and in time, by crossing the Eritrean plateau, it spread into northern Ethiopia. From the beginning of the fourth century until the 18th, before St. Justin's arrival on the evangelizing scene, dozens and dozens of monasteries were established by various local and foreign saints.<sup>4</sup>

The first evangelizers, known as Roman Saints, who spread Christianity in a decisive manner, were missionaries coming from the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the gospel preached by these men was a cause of misunderstanding between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. The Catholics, relying on the teaching of St. Frumentius, the first bishop sent by St. Athanasius around 340, insisted that the first evangelizers had been Catholics. They said, and rightly, that St. Athanasius could not ordain and send a bishop who had not followed the faith professed by himself.

On the other hand, the Orthodox, forgetting the long historical period of evangelization, which anyway had not stayed alive in people's memory, and being in

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<sup>1</sup>Eritrea is a recent nation in the Horn of Africa, on the shore of the Red Sea. It has an area of 127,750 sq. km. The population is calculated as 3,500,000 who live in Eritrea, with about a million scattered all over the world. It achieved its independence from Ethiopia after a long war of liberation in May 1991, later confirmed by a referendum in April 1993 with 99.8% in favour. The population is 50% Christian, the majority of whom are Orthodox Copts, and 50% Moslem. Catholics are about 20% and Protestants 5%. Devotion to St. Justin is not confined to Catholics, but is also found among the Orthodox and Moslems.

<sup>2</sup>When we speak of devotion to St. Justin this refers specially to the north of the country, and extends to the Showa Region in central Ethiopia which in his time was under the jurisdiction of King Sahlesellasie. The south was evangelized by Cardinal Massaia, who was appointed Apostolic Vicar in 1836. After his beatification in 1939 and canonization in 1975 the Vincentians of the Ethiopian Province, along with other Catholic groups of men and women working together, widely propagated devotion to St. Justin among the native clergy. This devotion is especially noted in Tigre among the Irob people.

<sup>3</sup>Acts 8:26-39; *The Church History of Eusebius*, reprinted 1986, Michigan, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>Giuseppe Sapeto, *Viaggio e Missione Cattolica dell'Abissinia*, (Fra i Mensà, i Bogos e gli Habab), Roma 1857, p. 62; C. C. Rossini, *Etiopia e gente di Etiopia*, Firenze 1937, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup>Salvatore Pane, *Vita del Beato Giustino de Jacobis*, Napoli 1949, p. 226; Joachim M. Aymro W., *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis-Ababa 1970, p.4.

possession today of all the monasteries of the Orthodox Church, want to show that the first evangelizers of Abyssinia had been of the Orthodox faith.

Naturally all these evangelizing saints were, and still are, honoured by the people for their virtues and their zeal in spreading and defending the Christian faith. Overcoming difficulties in the local traditions and persecution by pagans and animists, they succeeded in planting Christianity firmly. And, thanks to this missionary zeal, the Eritrean plateau and northern Ethiopia came to be known as the "Christian island" in the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup>

However, isolation on the one hand and the Moslem invasion on the other caused deep wounds in Church life and pastoral ministry in the area. Precisely because of this the Christian people, who were proud of their Christianity, became closed in on themselves and weakened to a very large extent.

Then the Egyptian Church, forging the so-called "Canons of the Council of Nicea," forbade for many centuries the appointment and ordination of an Eritrean or Ethiopian bishop.<sup>7</sup> The Egyptian bishop, not knowing either the language or culture of the people whom he was sent to lead, was limited to the administration of the sacraments and passing sentences of excommunication in matters of faith and morals.<sup>8</sup> The people were always terrified of being excommunicated. Gradually they came to lose knowledge of the basics of Christian teaching, holding on only to an interior faith which they could not profess with theological accuracy. This interior strength which could not be put into words was, nonetheless, jealously guarded and fanatically defended!

For example, when in 1780 the abuna [bishop] was appointed by the Coptic Patriarch of Egypt, before he took possession of his pastoral duties in Eritrea and Ethiopia, he sent a delegation to the civil authorities requesting the exiling of the first Abyssinian Catholic bishop, Abuna Tobia.<sup>9</sup>

A similar thing happened in 1841-42. Justin de Jacobis was a member of the delegation which sought the appointment of a new abuna. Abuna Salama was appointed and, on many occasions, he threatened Justin himself, who was obliged to abandon his pastoral

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<sup>6</sup>Lino da Mesero, *Etiopia Cristiana*, Milano 1964, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>The Moslems did not forget the military success of the Abyssinians in Yemen and, fearing that the Catholic bishops would incite opposition to the Moslems, forbade any further contacts between the two empires. The Coptic Patriarchs were the only ones from then on who could send bishops into Abyssinia, and the first one was sent by the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin at the time of Amru's victory over Egypt. This patriarch, in order to distance the Ethiopians even further from love of the Catholic religion, decreed canons for the Ethiopian Church. And in order to give legitimacy to these canons he falsely attributed them to the Council of Nicea. The thrust of these pseudo-canons was that the Ethiopians could not have a bishop taken from among themselves. They were allowed to accept only Egyptian bishops sent from Alexandria (Giuseppe Sapeto, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72).

<sup>8</sup>Abba Ayala Teklehaimanoy, *The Ethiopian Church*, Addis-Ababa 1982, p.32.

<sup>9</sup>Tobia, Ghiorgis Ghebreigziabhier was born in Debre Mariam Camcam in the Region of Dembia (Ethiopia). After studying theology at Propaganda Fide in Rome he was consecrated on 20 June 1788 as Bishop of Adulis (a port city of ancient Ethiopia, now in Eritrea, on the Red Sea). He worked tirelessly to establish the Catholic community in his own country. But in the end he had to leave Ethiopia and take refuge in Egypt. Kevin O'Mahoney, *The Ebullient Phoenix*, Addis-Ababa, Book III, p. 1

area. In spite of all this though, the Eritrean plateau and northern Ethiopia always remained a "strong rock" against all the expeditions from the Red Sea shore. If this "Christian Island" remained strongly closed in on itself, this did not mean that it totally rejected contacts with the outside world. Its isolation was founded on its firm conviction of the integrity of its faith and its rite. Faith in the Trinity and devotion to the Mother of God were two fixed points in its religion. Because of this conviction the people always made it clear to European missionaries, Catholic or Protestant, that these two points were basic.<sup>10</sup>

It is against this background that Justin de Jacobis's arrival in Abyssinia in 1839 must be seen. Catholics were still banned by the royal administration and the Orthodox Church was in a seriously weakened position, when Providence arranged for the appearance in the area of a herald of the gospel who was capable of understanding the mentality and cultural baggage of these people.

## **2. Justin's arrival in Adua and his first sermon**

St. Justin arrived in Adua, in the centre of northern Ethiopia, and at once began to study the language and culture of the area which he was to re-evangelize. Three months after his arrival in Adua, helped by his teacher "Debtera Matieos," he gave his first sermon in the local language, a sermon which became engraved in the hearts of the first community which had gathered around him. Among other things, he said: "... the door of the heart is the mouth, speech is the key of the heart ... When I speak to you I give you the key to my heart."<sup>11</sup> In uttering these words St. Justin succeeded in opening the hearts of his listeners who were puzzled by being convinced by the words of a "Ferengì," which was their name for a white missionary.

His first biographer, Abba Teklehaimanot the younger, says: "One day when he had exchanged a few words with an Ethiopian who had stopped to look at him while he was reading, received the following mocking answer: 'Hey, Ferengì (in the pejorative sense)! Friendship with a known devil is preferable to that with an unknown angel.'"<sup>12</sup> This sentence, even if said in a pejorative way, reveals all the conviction of the Orthodox with regard to their religious belief. And St. Justin had no difficulty in understanding this! Meanwhile he prayed to the Lord for light with regard to how he could penetrate the hearts of those who seemed to be unconvertible. However, the word of God, the most efficacious of all words, uttered by the mouth of a just man, in a short time softened the hearts of the seemingly unconvertible.

The combination of God's grace and the merits of the apostle's labours, together with hope in the future, soon led to growth in a stump which had been thought dry and lifeless. His teacher, the "Debtera," who was an expert in matters liturgical, dogmatic and moral, at the end of a meeting with Justin was so touched by the words and devotion of Justin that he let

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<sup>10</sup>Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia*, Oxford 1972, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup>*Diario de S. Giustino*, Frascati (RM) 1975, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup>E. Lucatelli e L. Betta, L.; *L'Abuna Yacob-Mariam*, Roma 1975, p. 72.

slip some words held dear by the Ethiopian Christians: "This priest who has spoken deserves to be our father!"<sup>13</sup>

These words of the Debtera may seem very strange, but they may be compared with what Jesus said to his disciples: "This is impossible for men, but everything is possible for God."<sup>14</sup> Speaking in a human way, it was very difficult, not to say impossible, to convince a Pharisee encased in his doctrinal conviction. But that is not true for Divine Providence. By changing the attitude of this singing teacher (Debtera) the Lord was preparing his vineyard to produce its fruit through the pastoral activity of the Apostolic Prefect.

### **3. God's blessing strengthens devotion to St. Justin**

It was not an easy task to deal directly with doctrinal matters, to enter into dialogue on the sacraments, and to express these themes from the basis of Catholic doctrine. He had, however, to deal with these matters. But the Apostolic Prefect chose to devote himself, during his first year of residence, to studying the language and culture, but even more so, with particular emphasis, to prayer. He spent his time celebrating Mass unobtrusively in his house, but praying inside the compound of the Orthodox when the people had finished their celebrations.

Mass celebrated in concealment in his house could not go unheard by the Father, who wished in that way to renew the hearts of St. Justin's future disciples. In the same way, the prayers said in the compound of the Orthodox Church were heard by Jesus who often, as the gospels tell us, used to go to Solomon's Porch.

In the beginning St. Justin had changed his small residence into a place of welcome, because he aimed at helping the sick, feeding the poor and visiting the aged and infirm. All those whom he visited, persons of different culture and social standing, were enormously impressed by the humility and charity of the Apostolic Prefect. These typically Vincentian ministries were very convincing proofs of his fatherly goodness to everyone who came into contact with him.<sup>15</sup> All those who were healed and helped could not just stay surprised and amazed at his charity and goodness, but went around talking about it, and little by little they also began to ask themselves questions and to open their minds, and even more so, their hearts. In doing this they were taking hold of the key to the Prefect's heart. After this, various people came to him of their own accord and stayed on with him, sharing his daily life. In that way a small Catholic community took shape around the Prefect. He himself was at pains not to damage his friendship with educated Orthodox persons because of this community which had gathered around him.

The Apostolic Prefect did everything he could to avoid doctrinal and dogmatic discussions. Instead, he preferred to welcome around him the more learned persons of the

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup>Mt 19:26.

<sup>15</sup>Abba Teklehaimanot, *La Vita di Giustino de Jacobis*, Adua, p. 161.

Orthodox Church, and to get them to teach the "Fidel Hawariat," which is the ABC, and the Ziema, liturgical chant, as well as the "Kene," which is liturgical hymn writing and composition.<sup>16</sup> But it was he himself who gave the catechetical instructions. Various important learned people of the Orthodox Church, who were against his residence among them, had the opportunity to monitor the content of his catechetical instruction, as well as his personal moral behaviour. They could not find any fault with him. His teaching was in full conformity with their doctrinal and liturgical traditions.

A second thing, which these learned Orthodox people noticed, was the Prefect's fatherly goodness towards everyone, and his charity which led to action. This drew various persons to become part of his little community which was in the process of growing up around him. So, when the right moment arrived, and with due prudence, he explained Catholic doctrine to his listeners, drawing on Church History. And then, when he had finished explaining everything, he ended up by saying: "My children, follow what seems to you to be the truth."

Several educated men, priests and deacons, having observed Justin's goodness of soul, decided to leave their own Church and give themselves over to being his disciples.

Meanwhile his furious opponents, seeing the growth of his community, became alarmed and began to persecute him. The Prefect, when he saw the danger, decided to move some of his community to Enticidò, a small village 20 km. east of Adua<sup>17</sup>. The Catholic community in this small village began to grow, under the guidance of a convert priest and a singing teacher. The Prefect stayed on for another five years in Adua. At the end of that time he put some priests and deacons in charge of the community there and he left in May 1845, with the majority of the community, for Gualà, on the outskirts of Addigrat. On the arrival of the Apostolic Prefect in Gualà the people of several villages of the SASIH, led by their priests, came to him and said they were willing to accept the Catholic faith. As well as this, a good number of monks, who had been impressed by Justin's spirituality during his many visits to their monasteries, decided to follow him without any problems.

The Prefect stayed two years in Gualà and God's blessing drew many members into his flock, in spite of the numerous difficulties caused by the civil and religious authorities. But there was always the problem of a lack of priests to minister to Justin's ever growing community. He prayed a lot to the Lord to send workers into his harvest, and at the same time continued to foster vocations within his community. The Lord was not slow in answering him. He knew in fact that a new Apostolic Vicar for Southern Ethiopia would soon be arriving. This was Bishop, later Cardinal, Guglielmo Massaia, who had been ordained bishop in Rome on 24 May 1846. He arrived in Gualà, together with four of his fellow missionaries, at the end of that year and stayed there for about two years. Within that period, on two occasions, he ordained 15 of Justin's candidates. These ordinations made a profound impression in the hearts of his small community and increased the great veneration and respect in which he was held.

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 334.

Let us listen to how they expressed their veneration for this man of God, whom Providence had given to them.

#### 4. The Earliest Opinions

During his first year in Adua Justin had the practice of giving out Miraculous Medals to all whom he met, telling them how Mary was the Mother of God and Mother of all who believed in Jesus Christ. He engaged in much charitable ministry in the name of Mary. His questioners were never satisfied with just what the Prefect told them about Mary, paying great attention also to observing how he venerated her and prayed to her. Because of this, they called him Abba Yakob Zemariam, which means Mary's Justin.

Further testimony is given by those who were under his guidance for many years, and who followed him right up to his deathbed. Here is how they wrote to him from Gondar on 27 July 1848:

*Greetings to our Father Justin, from his children who through divine mercy were dragged out of the darkness of schism and apostasy. May the love of Mary, Mother of Jesus, increase in you and us! Amen. We are very much consoled by the letter which you wrote to us. But, alas, we join in your present anguish, knowing how much more severe is spiritual suffering than physical suffering. Such suffering is worse than chains on the body if that were compared to the anguish and worry which bind the heart.*<sup>18</sup>

This letter was written during the severe and drawn out imprisonment in which his children were then. Sharing all their suffering he wrote a message full of hope and affection, in that way showing them all the greatness and depth of his fatherly love.

Fr. Poussou, Assistant General, on his way back from a visitation in China towards the end of 1851, stayed for a while in Halai, one of Justin's houses on the Eritrean plateau. He expressed his admiration for Justin in these words:

*It seems that Msgr. de Jacobis in particular is destined to accomplish great good in this country, and it is my conviction that if God plans to take pity on the people of Abyssinia, it is Msgr. de Jacobis who is to be the instrument of mercy.*<sup>19</sup>

And Msgr. Massaia retained this memory of the impression which our saint's spiritual life made on him:

*After 35 years I would be able, to a large extent, to go back over the sermons which I listened to in those days, so great was the impression which he made on me, and also on others ... To see this man, serious and pleasant at the same time, frugal in the matter of food, simple, modest and unobtrusive in his way of dressing, courteous and*

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<sup>18</sup>Salvatore Pane, *op. cit.*, p. 790.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 709.

*charitable in behaviour, always ready to say a comforting word, never separated from his disciples whom he treated with the gentle authority of a father and the affectionate familiarity of a brother, always with them in whatever they were doing, at work, at meals, at prayer; to watch him as he celebrated Mass like someone in ecstasy, to see him present at prayer in common, recollected and angel-like, in a word, to see him living a life which combined the isolation of a hermit and the zeal of an apostle, all this was, for us, a living sermon.*<sup>20</sup>

These comments show a real harmony between father and sons, between master and disciples. Many of his disciples did not have the enthusiasm for writing which would have shown their deep veneration towards Justin. If they had had this we would have the joy of seeing in their own words their very tender regard for him. On the other hand, it would be enough just to hear the single word "Father" to enable us to understand the deep devotion and veneration which they cultivated towards Justin.

Abba Teklehaimanot the younger, who was his first biographer, in talking about Justin's virtues and total dedication, lets us see simply that everyone became convinced, for the remainder of their lives, of the spiritual stature and dedication of this man in the service of the Word and of his neighbour!

## **5. Respect for and devotion towards Justin in the Church**

Immediately after the death of St. Justin almost all his disciples, convinced of his reputation for holiness, waited impatiently for the opening of the process for his canonization. In spite of the fact that an interval was needed between the death of the saint and the introduction of the cause of his beatification, these people began at once to tell of all the wonders which were happening one after the other. In this way, leaving the ecclesiastical process to make its own way forward, they for their part fostered devotion in their own hearts and minds. This tradition was passed on from one generation to the next right up to our own day. Before the arrival of the new wave of missionaries, both men and women, in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the diocesan priests and seminarians were enthusiastic in making known the reputation of this man in every corner of the country.

After his beatification several religious communities were established in Eritrea, and also in Ethiopia. And many of them, before embarking on their ministry, had the custom of making a pilgrimage to his tomb in Hebo to ask his intercession for the success of their undertaking. Even today his grave is one of the few pilgrimage destinations in all Eritrea, and it will still be so tomorrow, at least to a large extent, in northern Ethiopia. The Vincentian Fathers and the Daughters of Charity have been there, beside his tomb, to welcome pilgrims since 1947-48. Diocesan priests usually have their annual retreats and pastoral meetings there in Hebo, in the presence of the saint. On the other hand, the place also lends itself to silence and recollection.

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<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 585-586.

## 6. The people's devotion and respect

We are told that at the time of the death of the Apostolic Prefect, which took place in the Alighede valley at the side of the River Haddas as you go towards Halai, a squabble broke out about where he was to be buried. Everyone wanted him for themselves.

Fr. Delmonte, the vicar of the dying Prefect, backed up by the French consul in Massawa, decreed that the body be brought immediately to Muncullu, one of Justin's residences. The priests and monks who were beside the dying man, shattered by the death of their Father, decided to take the body to Hebo rather than to Muncullu as Fr. Delmonte wanted. They immediately sent a delegation to the people of Hebo to get them to come and bring back the body and prepare a place for its burial. Neither the people of Halai nor those of Hebo needed to be told twice, and they arrived, men and women, to get the body of their Father and shepherd. They arrived at the spot where the body was laid out, and after a period of long and sorrowful weeping, began to discuss where to bring him, and how to do so. The people of Hebo, backed up by the priests and monks who were there, distrusted the people of Halai and were successful in getting the body brought to Hebo for burial, and it was interred there a few metres in front of the village chapel. It was Friday, 3 August 1860. And that is how the saint's own wish was fulfilled, because during his life he had expressed the wish to be buried in Hebo.

The Vincentian missionaries, who were well aware of the virtues and holy life of Justin, made several efforts to have his remains brought back to Italy. But the Hebo villagers showed very decided opposition to this, and said:

*Abuna Jacob is our Father. At present his place is among his children. Here he gave birth to our faith. We love him and he loves us. And the proof of his love is his final wish. He asked to be kept among us and no one may go against the wish of a dying man. He is ours and we are his, and we will hold on to him.*

Msgr. Biancheri replied to them:

*Yes, a father should rest among his children, but a mother has the right to the body of her own son, and the Congregation is the Mother of Abuna Jacob. We are his brothers. Is it right, then, for you to go against a mother's wishes?*

But the villagers held on stubbornly to their point of view and did not allow the saint's remains to be taken away by the missionaries. And Msgr. Biancheri, noting the unwavering resolution of the people of Hebo, had to give in, and then came the selection of those who were to keep vigil, day and night, over the remains of their father.

In 1871 Emperor John IV of Ethiopia, furious about the presence of Vincentian missionaries, ordered all Catholic churches and missionaries' houses in his empire to be burnt down. The Hebo villagers, when they heard that all neighbouring churches had been torched by the soldiers, secretly exhumed their Father's remains and brought the precious burden to a safer place, and deposited it among the caves on the so-called "ZELIM EMNI," one of the



mountains overlooking Hebo. When the storm died down they brought the remains back to the chapel where they are jealously guarded right up to today.

## **Conclusion**

On top of what we have already said about the respect for and devotion to St. Justin, we may end up by reporting on two things which the Eritreans and Ethiopians do: They wash themselves over a period of two weeks in water which has been blessed beside St. Justin's tomb, and they take a pinch of earth from the place in which he was first interred. By doing these two things his clients are convinced that they will be healed of whatever form of illness from which they may be suffering. This may seem absurd — but this is what lovers of St. Justin do and they feel miraculously healed. That is why at the moment his tomb in Hebo is still a place of pilgrimage. And also, in times of disaster and war that is why it is to this tomb that many people come, trusting in his intercession. It is also where they come in times of drought to ask for rain through his intercession.

Many of them, because of their lack of historical knowledge combined with strong love and devotion, think and believe that St. Justin was an Abyssinian, in other words one of themselves. Their devotion and admiration for, and their love of, this man are so strong that they say: "He could not be a Ferengì," which means a foreigner.

It remains to be said: "Yes, God sent Jesus Christ to save the human race. But this same God likewise sent, in Jesus Christ, St. Justin to save the Abyssinian people. St. Justin made himself Abyssinian in everything in order to win the Abyssinians for God. That is what they think and firmly believe. May St. Justin again today obtain for this people, who have so loved peace, reconciliation as well."

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)