

A Tour of the Vincentian Mission in Ethiopia

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In the history of the Congregation of the Mission in Ethiopia, there are two important events: the coming of the Vincentians in 1839, and the return of the Vincentians after an absence three years (1895-1898). I recently visited these missions of the Congregation. My main purpose in visiting was to walk in the footsteps of our Missionaries and to talk with some of the people with whom they shared their faith experiences. This tour took me two weeks, and here I want to share with you what I saw and experienced.

Among the first Vincentians who came to Ethiopia was an Italian missionary, St. Justin de Jacobis (1800-1860). After sending his two companions, Montuori and Fr. Sapeto to Gonder and Showa, respectively, he stayed in Aduwa in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. After some time, he went to Guala and Alitena, where he laid the foundations for the future of the Catholic Church. St. Justin de Jacobis is also a founder of Catholic Church in Eritrea, but by 1880 that mission had been handed over to the Italian Capuchins.

One year before the battle of Adwa in 1895, as the Italian army was moving to the Tigray region, the French Vincentian missionaries were chased out. After a few years, they returned in 1898 to their original mission in Guala and Alitena. In order to arrive they had to travel in a round-about manner because they were not allowed by the Italians to come through Massawa (which is about 300 km from the mission). Thus, they traveled through Djibouti and from Djibouti, they walked some 2000 km in a period of five months. They passed through Addis Ababa and were well received by King Minilik II. There these heroic confreres, Fathers Coulbeaux, Gruson, and Br. LePriol received permission to go to their former mission.

After they reached their destination, they and their successors made great efforts to open missions in the center of the country, especially Addis Ababa and its surroundings area. Traveling by way of Djibouti, they opened four missions during the period of 1918-1930: Addis Ababa, Mendida, Dessie, and Gonder.

1. Addis Ababa

I started my visit on August 3rd from the community house in Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa is 2400 m above sea level. It has also been the seat of the African Union since 1963. The house in Addis Ababa was founded in 1918 by Fr. Sournac Etienne, a French Vincentian. He came to Addis

Ababa (which means new flower,) by traveling from Alitena to Asmara on foot, from Asmara to Djibouti by ship and from Djibouti to Addis Ababa by train. In Addis Ababa, he bought some land and built a small house there... a house which evolved into a large compound that now serves as the Provincial house for Vincentians in Ethiopia. Ministry in this area includes caring for the some 100 family in St. Mary Sion Parish. The Vincentian major seminary is also in Addis Ababa and there are eighteen students in philosophy and theology, students from the Congo, Burundi, and Uganda. There is also an elementary school and a high school where some 800 students are studying. Most of these students are from poor families.

In the local community there are ten confreres including the Visitor. The confreres are engaged in the schools mentioned above as well as in different pastoral and social services.

2. Mendida

Afterwards, I took the bus to Debrebrihan, a town which is 151 km northeast of Addis Ababa. The fields are green and the farmlands are full planted with various forms of wheat and grain. The first Vincentian missionary who went to this same area after Fr. Coulbeaux was Fr. Joseph Beateman (September 1921). He came from Guala (the first Vincentian house in Ethiopia that was established by St. Justin de Jacobis in 1844). Like Fr. Sournac, he came through Masawam and from Djibouti he took a train to Addis Ababa and then walked to Ankober, a mission founded in 1864 by Cardinal Massia. His primary objective was to seek out those Catholic families who were abandoned. He went directly to a village which was for the former seat of King Minilik and a place where Catholics had been prominent.

I stopped in Derbrebrehan, a town said to have been founded in the 15th century. From there I took another bus. I then traveled on foot along the road, since there was a lack of transportation. After 27 km, I reached a small town called Mendida. The local people speak both Oromiffa and Amharic. Amharic is the official language in Ethiopia. Fr. Baeteman spoke both of these languages and he also spoke Tigregrn and Irobigna when he was in the north. It was here in Mendida that Fr. Beateman founded the Catholic mission in 1923. Because of severe persecution of the Catholics at that time, he could not continue his priestly ministry in the area around Ankober. That was why he entered that area not as a priest but he disguised himself as a merchant.

He met Catholics in secret at a place called Ambo, a very small village about a three hours walk from Ankober, where he administered the Sacraments at night. In his book titled "Le Camouflé Le bon Dieu" he recalled those events, and said that when the Catholics recognized that he was a Catholic priest, they cried tears of joy.

As previously noted, the mission in Ankober was founded in 1864 by the Capuchin friar, Cardinal Massajj. The Cardinal and his confreres were chased out of Ethiopia in 1879, and local Catholics were persecuted. Many of those who were exiled went to Harar in Eastern Ethiopia, where they remained in hiding. Fr. Baeteman went there to search for those scattered sheep. On his second visit, he met the local chief of Mendida called Mr. Metaferia who invited him to settle in his village.

At Mendida, this local chief gave him a piece of land near his house. There Fr. Baeteman opened a small store and arranged for medical services for the people. Slowly, people identified him as a man of God, and not as a merchant. They began to call him Abba Zinabum (which means 'Father of Rain') because when he arrived, it rained. It took him an extended period of time to build a chapel. He started his real mission with a very small group and remained there for seven years. When he left Ethiopia in 1928 he had established Holy Savior Church and a school, both of which are still active today.

The Vincentians left this mission during the Italian military occupation (1935-1941), but the mission had been entrusted to the pastoral care of Cistercian Monks. They administered the parish with the help many families and young people. There were many vocations to the priesthood and the sisterhood, including Daughters of Charity. The Cistercians also administered a technical school, as well as their own novitiate. After the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday, which was celebrated in Ge'ez, the beautiful Ethiopian rite, I took a long walk with the superior, Fr. Kidane. In the afternoon, I played volleyball with the young people.

The next day, early in the morning I accompanied Fr. Mekonnen Zewde, my classmate in theology, and together we went back to Debrebrihan. From there we took a bus and went to Ankober, the place where J. Baeteman first went to look for the Christians who had remained there and who had not seen a priest for many, many years. Ankober is a very small village located on a hill some 3870 meters above sea level. In 1839 Justin de Jacobis sent Fr. Sapeto, one of his first followers, to this place in 1839. We went direct to the palace, where the kings of Showa had lived before they moved to Addis Ababa, the city where King Minilik lived. There one can see both the current palace and the one that was destroyed. From the palace, one can see clearly in every direction (this site had been chosen by the kings because of its strategic location).

Because of the distance and a lack of transportation, we could not visit Firkre Ghimb and Ambo, the places where Fr. Baeteman once served the Catholic community in secret. We were told that there are no more Catholics at these places. So the next morning, I took the bus to Debrebrihan, where I stayed with the Cistercians before going on to Dessie.

3. Dessie

Dessie is 641 km distant from Addis Ababa. In this town, there is a Catholic Church founded by the Vincentian Fathers on May 11, 1930. The founders of this mission were Fr. M. Bringer and Fr. Yoseph Gebru (an indigenous priest). Since 1937, this mission has been under the care of the Capuchins. There on finds Kidane Miheret Catholic Church, elementary school and high school. Like the parish in Mendida, this parish has also been a source for many vocations to the priesthood and to various congregations of women religious. The current Capuchin provincial, Fr. Yohannes, is originally from this parish and he was the one who warmly welcomed me. I spoke at length with Mr. Indris, a 93 year-old man who knew the first confreres who served there as missionaries. He told me that originally the land on which the church was first built had belonged to his family. Although Mr. Indris' father and brothers converted to Catholicism, he remained a Muslim. He served as watchman for the confreres, and knew the first group of confreres who founded the parish. He told me about Br. Alphonse Blande CM who is the only Vincentian buried here. At the present time there are two missionary chapels connected to this parish: one in the town of Kombolcha, and the other in the town of Kobo.

4. Mekelle

The next day, Fr. Begashew, the superior, took me to the bus station and I traveled to Mekelle, 785 km from Addis Ababa. It is the capital city of the state of Tigray and the local language is Tigrigna. a Vincentian community house has been located in this town since 1999. It has no direct relationship with my visit, but it is noteworthy because of the two confreres, Fr. Lukas Gebre Meskel and Fr. Desalegn Welde Kidan who live there and administer the school and a youth center that provide services to over 1000 students. The school is named after Abba Gebremichael (1791-1855), our Ethiopian martyr, and the youth center is named after St. Vincent de Paul. This center provides many services to the local youth (library services, tutoring, as well as various cultural and sports activities). The priests provide religious services for the university students. In Mekelle there are also two houses of the Daughters of Charity and another Church which is administered by diocesan priests (nevertheless, our two confreres there minister closely with them). I visited an Orthodox Church near Wukro, 45 km north of Mekelle, a church that was built from a single rock in the fourth century by two brothers, King Abreha and King Atsibia.

5. Gu'ala

My next destination was Adigrat, which is 120 km from Mekelle, and the Seat of the Adigrat Eparchy. The Daughters of Charity brought me there and I was able to meet Tesfasilasie Medhin, Bishop of Adigrat, who is originally from Alitena (my next stop). He has a great need for the Vincentian presence in his Eparchy. Fr. Tihum Tesfaye, the pastoral coordinator, showed me where St. Justin de Jacobis built the first Vincentian house in Abyssinian land in 1845.

In the time of St. Justin, there was much persecution of Catholics in this area. It was here that Justin started a house of formation (a house which still stands). The house is now used as retreat center. It is our first and only "shrine" in Ethiopia and in 2010 it was there that the community celebrated the 350 anniversary of the deaths of Saints Vincent and Louise. This is also the place where the confreres make their annual retreat. In the compound, there is the statue of St. Justin de Jacobis that was erected by Mgr. Tesfassilassie in 2008 (the anniversary of the Ethiopian millennium). This shrine is now administered by the Salesians and they are aided by some Sisters.

A parish record book indicates that Frs. Sournac and Baeteman spend some time here before going to Addis Ababa and Mendida. This mission was handed over to the diocese in 1941.

When Justin de Jacobis went to Alitena, he departed from here, Adigrat. He had been invited to go there by the people and soon after arriving he bought land, settled there and opened a new mission. In his memory, I did what many other Vincentian missionaries and faithful of this area have done, namely, I decided to make a "pilgrimage" to Alitena. Therefore, after Mass, I started my pilgrimage and stayed that night at the Cathedral compound, where I was warmly welcomed.

6. Alitena

The next day, early in the morning, I continued my pilgrimage to Alitena, which is 50 km from Adigrat. On the way, I was invited by some people to rest and take time for "coffee and cactus". The local people say it was St. Justin de Jacobis who brought this plant to this country. One can easily eat ten of them at once, because they are so sweet. On the way, I passed many soldiers in uniform but things appeared to be peaceful. The Sebia church was the last one built by the French Vincentians before they left the country in 1937 because of the Italian military occupation. Along the way, I saw many Orthodox churches on the various hills (the Orthodox are the majority in Ethiopia). In my travels I noticed that Catholics, despite being in the minority, work together with other people in order to improve the lives of their brothers and sisters. An example of this is the installation of an

irrigation system to help farms better manage water resources, especially during the dry season.

After walking the entire day, seeing beautiful sights, taking pictures, greeting people, stopping for coffee and lunch, and crossing valleys and hills, I finally reached my destination, Alitena. As one enters the village, the first thing seen is the Nativity Church which originally belonged to Orthodox community. Many years ago, due to a lack of Orthodox priests, this community invited St. Justin to be their shepherd, and they promised to be his faithful flock. So this church is the sign of the promise between St. Justin and Irob people of Ethiopia.

The people of Alitena are called Irob, and they have their own language (Irobigna) which is rooted in the Cushitic family. Like many other languages in Ethiopia (except Ge'ez, Amharic and Tigreña), the Irob dialect was not a written language. Many of the early Vincentian missionaries of that era spoke this language. It was in 1845 that St. Justin de Jacobis came to this place for the first time. The current church was renovated many times (the previous church had been pillaged and on one occasion was burned to the ground).

It was in this particular church that Blessed Gebremichael was also ordained by St Justin. In this Church there ten Vincentians are interred, including Fr. Edward Gruson, one of three early confreres. He was seen as heroic by the people because he walked 2000 km on foot to reach Alitena. It was after Fr. Gruson became superior of the mission that the French Vincentians were able to expand the mission to southern Ethiopia. He instructed and assisted the confreres in opening up a mission in the center of Ethiopia. However, he loved the mission in Alitena and he died there in 1934 and is buried in the midst of his beloved people.

In this compound where St. Justin and his followers lived, there is a statue of St. Justin which looks like the one I saw in Gu'ala. The archives found in the school are a first-hand resource of Vincentian history in Ethiopia, especially the years following 1897, a time when Alitena was the center of the mission. These archives give witness to the dedication of the confreres in their ministry of forming the clergy as well as their own on-going formation. The Church is alive and active because of the efforts made by those first confreres to translate books into the local language and because of the readiness of the confreres to share the word of God with their people. In the Ethiopian Catholic Church, most bishops, priests and sisters are from this area where the Vincentians have generously served.

Near the priests' house there is a community house of Sisters, founded in 1885 by the first group of the Daughters of Charity, who provided many services to the community as well as to Dessie and other outlying areas. However, after one hundred-twenty five years of pres-

ence and generous service, it was recently closed, due to a lack of vocations.

According to a custom begun by people, the feast of St. Justin de Jacobis is observed monthly on the eighteenth day of each month by an Association of the faithful named after him. Each month they come together from the surrounding parishes for prayer. I just happened to be there during for the monthly day of prayer, (coincidence or Providence?) when the members of this Association had a retreat. They were very happy to have a Vincentian priest among them and on that day I too, felt as though I was blessed. In the area around Alitena, St. Justin de Jacobis is revered and greatly loved for his zealous presence and for the apostolic activity that he initiated.

I met the son of Delibis Wolde Giorgis, whose father had been a catechist and guide for many years with the missionary confreres in Ethiopia. From between 1920-1932, he wrote many letters to the Vincentian seminarians in Panningen who were being formed for the Province of Holland. In those letters he encouraged them to come to Ethiopia and evangelize the people. He told them about the mission, the people, and shared with them the successes and the difficulties encountered in this mission. His dream that the confreres from Holland would come to Ethiopia was made real in 1958 when the Dutch took over the mission from the French confreres. His letters and notes with regard to the mission were sent to Panningen by a Dutch confrere, Fr. Cornelius de Wit, where they were eventually compiled into a book entitled *Brieven uit Abessinië*. Fr. Cornelius is one of the confreres buried in the historical church of Alitena.

7. Gondar

After passing a number of lovely days in Alitena, I went to Adigarat with the Sisters and reached the border town of Shiraro which is located to the west of Tigray. I passed through the town of Aduwa, the first town where St. Justin stayed after arriving in Ethiopia. It was also in this town that he delivered his famous homily in Amharic. I then arrived in Gondar, which is 721 km from Addis Ababa. Gondar is one of the oldest towns in Ethiopia, founded in 1630s by King Fasiledes. The beautiful palace that was built by this king is still standing. It should be noted that it was here that the Jesuits spread Catholicism in 16th and 17th century (1557-1633). They converted King Sesinuos, father of King Fasiledes to Catholicism and as a result, Catholicism became the state religion (from 1626-1633). There are still some ruins of the Catholic churches from that era.

It was in this town that two Capuchins, Fathers Agathange and Casien, were martyred on August 7, 1638. It was also in this particular town that Justin de Jacobis sent out one of his first missionaries, namely,

Fr. Montuori. It was also in this same town that Blessed Gebremichael was first arrested on July 15, 1854 and began his journey toward martyrdom.

At different times, Vincentian missionaries made many attempts to come to Gonder. Even the catechist, Delibis, was once imprisoned after it was discovered that he was Catholic. Finally in the late 1920's, two Catholic priests came to this town. One was Fr. Sournac, founder of the house in Addis Ababa, and the other was an indigenous priest, Fr. Abba Kassa. They established a Catholic mission outside of Gonder in a place called Arbarba of Kerker. This was verified by Mrs. Abeba Belay Kassa, a lifelong resident who said she received her First Communion from Fr. Sournac. The town received this unusually long name (Arbarba of Kerker) because of a local legend that claims that forty cows in the town all gave birth to calves on the same night. So the local people named it "Arbaba" which means forty. Presently, this mission is administered by a community of Sisters who have an eye clinic, elementary school, and a church (that is now under construction).

There are a few Catholic families left. In Gonder the people speak Amharic. Yet in this particular area, the people have their own language, known as Kemmatigna. In Gonder, there are three different religious communities: the Missionaries of Charity, Saint. Hanna Sisters and the Cistercian Monks. I stayed two nights with the Cistercians who live in the town and administer a school and a parish. After this I went to Gorgora, which is 60 km from Gonder to visit an area where the Jesuits had worked. The next day, two confreres, Fathers Lukas and Iyasu Tesema arrived and together we drove to Bahirdar, 120 km from Gonder.

8. Bahirdar

Bahirdar is a very beautiful town and is the capital city of the Amhara region. One can relax on the lake or move about the lake in boats or simply stand in awe at the Nil waterfall which is located some 30 km from the town. Here the Vincentians have a community house, which is under the jurisdiction of the Mekelle house. There are two confreres living here: Fathers. Alemayehu Haile and Iyasu Tesema, both of whom are involved in pastoral ministry. They have small, but active Christian communities, and I was invited to participate in their weekly prayer service. The confreres also minister as chaplains to the university students in Mekelle. They also administer a well-known high school in the region. They are attempting to start a kindergarten for the members of the Negede Weto tribes, who are often excluded from participation in society. They received a small land grant from the government and at the present time an elementary school is under construction. Actually, the mission in Bahirdar was started in the early

1990's by Eritrean confreres. At the end of the Ethiopian-Eritrean War, this house went to the Ethiopian Province. There is also a community house of the Daughters of Charity in this area.

My visit made me tired but I must also admit that I was greatly edified. I felt blessed in being able to visit the places where our Vincentian ancestors lived, and served. It was truly wonderful to see the establishments (past and present) of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity as well as the establishments of other religious congregations. The blood, sweat, and tears of our founding Vincentians was not in vain! It was fruitful, and it continues to be so!

From this short visit, one comes to understand the past and the present history of these missions. In the northern part of Ethiopia, most the missions which were founded by our French confreres have been handed over to other religious communities or dioceses. But in the southern and western parts of the country (in the Apostolic vicariate of Nekemte and Jimma-Bonga), the Vincentian presence is active, and even though we are handing over some parishes to local clergy, the Holy See continues to seek confreres to serve as bishops and apostolic administrators. But this is part of our Vincentian charism as missionaries! Even still, there are requests from many bishops to send confreres to work in their dioceses and the Province of Ethiopia is ready to go wherever the mission calls us to "preach the Gospel to the poor."

An example "par excellence" of missionary inspiration to the confreres in Ethiopia is Fr. Francois Brillet, the last living French confrere who worked as a missionary in Ethiopia for many years. Now at 91 years of age, he lives in Paris at the Maison-Mere, but he still inspires all of us in Ethiopia with his dedication and fervor for the Vincentian Missionary spirit. *Merci, cher Pere!*

Long life for our Province of Ethiopia!

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