

The Most Precious Fruit of the Missionary Apostolate of St Justin de Jacobis

Blessed Gabra Mikā'ēl (1791-1855),
a Martyr for the Faith in Abyssinia

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"... your fathers were put to the test to see if they really had fear of... God. Abraham... precisely through testing... became the friend of God.

... and all who would please God were tested by many tribulations and remained faithful" (Jud 8:26).

Introduction

This past 30th July the Church celebrated the liturgical memorial of the *dies natalis* of St Justin de Jacobis, better known as abbā Yaqob Māryām¹ (1800-1860), who identified himself with the reserved, but proud, Abyssinian people, to such an extent that he embraced the cultural heritage and internalised it, personalising the friendly intuitions and wise adaptations, which make it one of the best inculturated Christian communities in Africa *today*.

This extraordinary adoptive son of Abyssinia² embraced and welcomed all that was valid and good in the prestigious "*traditio*" of the Orthodox Church, twin sister of the Church of Rome, which has "*the preoccupation of all the Churches*" (2 Cor 11:28), which look to

¹ "... *this is the name by which I am known here*" (Epistolario, 567; cf. also 557: 1473; Diario, parte II, 320).

² "... *in this wonderful country, which is now my homeland...*" (Epistolario, 1076); "... *of my poor country of adoption*" (ibid., 1225); "... *the scholarly language of my second homeland*" (ibid., 1273); "... *this land which is also my homeland of choice...*" (ibid., 1569).

her as “to her who presides in charity.”³ Right from the start of his impassioned *diakonia missionaria*, abbā Yaqob adopted the *ge’ez* rite and shared the simple authentic life of the Abyssinian people. He organised missionary residences in consultation with the local leaders, and in harmony with the socio-cultural ambience which had welcomed him. He established schools open to everyone where, in addition to general cultural material, the ancient disciplines of the almost two thousand year old Abyssinian Christian tradition were learned. Since, in virtue of his unusual apostolic ministry, he had to move continually from place to place, abbā Yaqob Māryām had organised a “travelling seminary,” which followed him around and learned on the spot practical pastoral care,⁴ imbued with a tireless capacity for listening and with a hands-on approach to the disregarded poor people, which is not found in the manuals. The seminarians did not learn from silent, disconnected, professorial pages of the ancient manuscripts in *ge’ez*, nor in silent and austere college halls, but from the actual example of abbā Yaqob, who made himself into a *living book* of gospel synthesis for his beloved Abyssinian people.

In twenty-one years of intensive missionary life abbā Yaqob Māryām, with a mind free from bias, and a sole desire of establishing links of brotherhood and friendship, accepted men and women from all levels of society, especially native monks and priests: “Many monks and priests come to me each day.”⁵ In the last group, welcomed as an advance gift of communion between the two traditions of east and west, for integrated life, soundness of doctrine⁶ and the never ending search for truth, the figure of abbā Gabra Mikā’el⁷ shines out, a genuine son of the soil, representative of the most authentic strand of the Abyssinian Orthodox tradition.

³ ST IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Epistola ad Romanos*, Inscr.: *Patres Apostolici I*, ed. F.X. Funk, 1901-1902, 253.

⁴ “Besides, in the countryside our priests are no longer sufficient for the work, and I would have to make use of all the students of our little seminary for teaching the catechism to the children” (Epistolario, 1180-1181).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁶ “... perhaps the most learned man in all of Abyssinia...” (*ibid.*, 779).

⁷ St Justin de Jacobis in his *Diario* and *Epistolario*, from the first reference on 29/06/1841 to the final one on 30/11/1858 refers to abbā Gabra Mikā’el 146 times, in a total of 2,670 pages.

Biographical Sketch⁸

Gabra Mikā'el (Michael's servant) was born in 1791 in Dibo Didān Mehrat, in the Goḡḡām region, to the east of the Blue Nile. His father was a certain Ato Akilo, but his mother's name is still unknown. He was quick witted from childhood, and liked studying. Later on, in adolescence, as a result of a serious ophthalmic condition, he lost his left eye. At the age of twenty-five, a mature young man, he entered the strict monastery of Martula Māryām, where he made his monastic profession. For about a year he lived separately as a hermit, according to the strictest observation of Abyssinian monasticism. Always seeking truth he went off to the monastery of Dabra Mosa (the Mountain of Moses) for intensive study of the *Mashafa Manakosāt* (the book for monks), and also of the *Mashafa buruk zadarasa Abū šāker* (the holy book written by Abu Sakir).⁹

The extraordinary and demanding earthly pilgrimage of abbā Gabra Mikā'el will be to unravel the tiring but fascinating search for truth. This journey will be characterised by tireless research, the intimate joy of discovery, and the creative dream of his being incarnated into concrete human affairs, and the most heroic witness to Christ.

Schools of Christology

There was one disputatious area of theology which more than any other agitated and conditioned the Abyssinian Orthodox Church, and that was the age-old and complex question of Christology.¹⁰ There were three schools of Christology in Abyssinia: Kārrā, Qebāt and Yeseggā Liḡ; all of them admitted the deification of the human nature of the Word, but they could not agree among themselves on its modality. For the Kārrā and the Qebāt, the functions and peculiar characteristics of the human nature of the Word were annulled by the union of the two natures. On the other hand, for the Yeseggā Liḡ the human nature of the Word remains distinct and therefore

⁸ The Abyssinian Mamheran, Scholars, speak of "gadla", meaning "spiritual combat", alluding to the biblical text: "Militia est vita hominis super terram" (Jb 7:1; cf. id., 14:14). [The author uses the English word "scholars". Tr.]

⁹ Cf. AZIZ S. ATIYA, "Abū Shākir ibn al-rāhid," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York 1991, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰ Cf. A. FUROLI, *Pourquoi l'Église d'Ethiopie s'est-elle séparée de Rome? Etude historico-théologique*, in "L'Église en Afrique et le pluralisme en théologie," Mélanges en l'honneur du Prof. Mgr J.A. Vanneste, in *Revue Africaine de Théologie*, Vol. XII (avril-octobre 1988), nn. 23-24, pp. 197-218.

separate from the divine nature. All three of the schools of Christology admitted the natural and not adoptive filiation, as the logical consequence of the deification of the human nature of the Word.

For the Kārrā school of Christology the deification took place through the union of the two natures. It affirms that the Word is the anointer, the anointed and the anointing, (the technical term in *Ge'ez* is *wald qeb'e*), in that way uniting the human nature of his distinct person, deifying it in the strict sense. For the followers of the *Qebāt* school of Christology, the deification of the human nature of the Word took place through the anointing by the Holy Spirit. Within the Trinity the Father is the anointer, the human nature is the anointed and the Holy Spirit is the anointing, this latter understood as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Word. On the other hand, for the followers of the *Yesegā Liḡ* school, within the Trinity the Holy Spirit is the *life* of the Word, while on the level of human nature he is gift. The *Mamheran* of this school affirm that the Father is the anointer, the human nature is the anointed, and the Holy Spirit is the anointing.

Another much debated matter was the number of Christ's births. Followers of the *Kārrā* and the *Qebāt* held that there were two births of Christ: birth from the Father from all eternity and birth from Mary of Nazareth in the fullness of time and of history. On the other hand, the followers of the *Yesegā Liḡ* school hold that there were three births: from the father, from the Virgin Mary and from the Holy Spirit through the anointing received in his human nature, by which Christ became the firstborn of all creatures (cf. Rm 8:29, Col 1:15-18). Abbā Gabra Mikā'el had been happy as an adherent of this last theological school, even if he did not agree with all and every one of its positions. He demanded more of himself than of others,¹¹ and threw himself headlong into the study of the *Haymānota Abaw*¹² (*Fides Patrum*), but even this did not give an answer to his most intimate requirements. A deep personal crisis began for him, which plunged him into a painful interior solitude, because of his insatiable thirst for God: "*Make me know Him whom my soul loves; I am, in fact, wounded by your love*" (cf. Sg 3:2-4; 4:9; 5:8-16; 6:3; 7:11). Here we are dealing with that precise type of "insatiable interior dryness" which affects only the greatest souls, and which can never find complete satisfaction in this world. "*I stretch out my hands, like*

¹¹ Among his many students was the son of the Negus Teklè Ghiorghis († 1817), the future Atziè Yohannes III (1840-1855), Rās of the Shoa.

¹² This is a work on Christology translated from the Arabic around the middle of the 15th century.

thirsty ground I yearn for you" (Ps 143:6). Such souls are constantly seeking the fountain and, having found it, drink thirstily from it, but in doing so they experience always an on-going thirst. In trying to cope with their thirst they will yearn with inextinguishable desire for Him for whom they will always have more thirst, continuously drinking Him in: "*You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*"¹³

In the life of the contemplative vision of the *good*, there always follows the piercing problem of *how*, in actual fact, to pursue it; this is the gap between the thrilling intuitive moment which *sees* clearly, and the tormented discursive moment which *works out* slowly and tiringly. For this intellectual restlessness of his abbā Gabra Mikā'el took the decision no longer to ally himself to any of the above Christological schools, but to restrict himself to accepting truth as rigorously contained in Sacred Scripture alone.

A beggar in search of Truth

The bitter disillusionment in the face of the accepted teaching of his former *mamheran*, divided and sectionalised among themselves into opposing positions, and the intense "interior burning," decided him to make himself *a beggar in search of truth*.¹⁴ The love and thirst, which he enthusiastically sought, are an interior wound which heals very slowly: "*O God, you are my God, I seek you at dawn, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh pants for you, like arid, waterless, desert land*" (Ps 63:1-2). He spent some time in the monasteries of Debra Barbarē, Gundagundè, Debre Bizen, etc., and went through all their libraries, avidly poring over the pages of each book, entering deeply into the subtle presence of *Someone* who, silently, was present there and who alone gave meaning to the wisdom of those human words. Gabra Mikā'el understood that he had to get himself into the religious listening mode, training himself in deciphering the Word, in choosing between subjective and objective inclinations, in dedicating himself to the burdensome welcoming of the Truth, and to its purifying obedience. As time went on the monk, transformed by the Spirit into a real *cooperator Veritatis*, came to understand that the books were useful, but that by themselves were not enough. This led to his decision to begin again, in the places where Jesus

¹³ ST AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Bk I, 1.

¹⁴ The *Imitation of Christ* teaches that the Christian should always be "*semper paratus doceri*" (Bk IV, ch. XVIII, 4). Note that the verb is in the passive voice, because of the context.

had lived and died.¹⁵ It was necessary to go right back to the origins of Truth.¹⁶ He therefore made his way to the port of Massawa, arriving in November 1840. He waited seven weeks there for a ship that would take him to the Holy Land,¹⁷ but it was an unsuccessful wait. Then a peremptory order from Webē, the *dagiyāt* (general, governor of a province) reached him. He was to be a member of an important delegation, headed by abbā Yaqob Māryām, which was on its way to Cairo to obtain from the Patriarch of the Orthodox Coptic Church an *Abun* for Abyssinia, which had not had one for thirteen years. On 17 February 1841 the ship on which the delegation was travelling set sail from Massawa for Cairo. On several occasions during the voyage abbā Gabra Mikā'el was able to share his doubts and his on-going research with abbā Yaqob. Justin explained to him the centrality of conscience, and the importance of conscience which is unconditional opening up to Truth, which has an intrinsic link with Truth, and is uninterrupted listening to Truth. He also told him that personal conversion is never completely ended, because the “yes” which the Christian says to the God of Jesus Christ is never completed.

When they arrived in Cairo in May 1841 they went to the elderly Coptic Patriarch Petros who, after a few days of reflection, designated abbā Andreas, an Egyptian monk barely twenty years of age,¹⁸ as the new *Abun* of Abyssinia. On the following 24 May he was consecrated bishop, taking the name Salāmā (peaceful), the third *Abun* to bear that name. This name indicated a whole programme, difficult to carry out given the actual situation in which Abyssinia found itself then.

Abbā Yaqob had previously agreed with Webē that the delegation, once its business in Egypt had been concluded, should go on to

¹⁵ The French historian and thinker Ernest Joseph Renan (1823-1892) wrote: “The Holy Land is the Fifth Gospel.”

¹⁶ “*Their [Christians] teaching was not discovered by reflection and the research of men who loved novelty, nor are they basing themselves... on a human philosophical system*” (Epistle to Diognetus, ch. 5; in Funk, 397).

¹⁷ In Eastern spirituality there was a huge class of persons (in Abyssinia the Batawi, in Russia the Stranniki) who spent their lives visiting sanctuaries, churches, monasteries, Mount Athos and the Holy Land. They were seeking God by means of this never-ending pilgrimage along the roads, to link up with *the holy places of popular devotion*, and so go through life in faithful imitation of the Galilean Wanderer, detached from everything and everyone, sticking to the programme of the one thing necessary (cf. Lk 10:42; see *The Story of a Russian Pilgrim*).

¹⁸ “... our *Abuna* is too young...” (Epistolario 869); “... in the hands of a young Coptic prelate...” (ibid., 1002).

Rome, followed by a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, before its final return to Abyssinia. Having obtained the necessary authorizations, the Abyssinian delegates set sail from Alexandria for Rome on 17 July 1841, arriving in Rome in the dead of night on 12 August. On the 15th, the feast of the Assumption, the delegation of important Abyssinians was invited to participate in the solemn pontifical celebration in the patriarchal basilica of St Mary Major, in the presence of Gregory XVI. On the 17th the Pope warmly welcomed the members of the delegation at his summer residence, Monte Cavallo (today the *Quirinale*). Gregory XVI, who had been Prefect of Propaganda Fide, dialogued with them on their missions, showing a lively interest in what they had to say. At this event he was presented with a letter from the *dagiyāt* Webē. At a second audience on the 29th, once again at the Quirinale, Gregory gave to the official representatives of the Abyssinian delegation¹⁹ his reply to Webē's letter, together with costly gifts for himself.

The Abyssinians left Rome on 12 September 1841 and made a short visit to the [Vincentine] community, via dei Vergini in Naples, where abbā Yaqob had been a student at first, then director and finally superior in 1838. Then "*the deputation of Abyssinian nobles*"²⁰ was received by King Ferdinando II (1810-1859). On 5 October they set sail from Naples for Egypt, from where they were to go onwards to the holy places. All through their time in Christ's homeland they were the guests of the "... *charity of the most praiseworthy Fathers of the Holy Land;*"²¹ "*gratitude obliges me to let you know that the Frs of the Holy Land, whether in Jerusalem, Cairo or Alexandria, have showered on us the most generous and kindly attentions.*"²² In the Constantinian basilicas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem abbā Yaqob Māryām celebrated the Eucharist at which all the pilgrims participated. "*We would willingly have stayed on in Jerusalem for a year, if their guide... had not prudently suggested leaving.*"²³

On 15 December the pilgrims made their final farewell to the Holy Land and, even though with sad hearts, set out on the return journey.

¹⁹ "Abba Ghebrè Michele. One of the most learned Deferi or teachers in all Abyssinia and third delegate" (ibid., 349).

²⁰ Ibid., 312.

²¹ Ibid., 1054. Clement VI (1342-1352) in the **Bulls** *Gratias agimur* and *Nuper carissimæ*, in 1352 canonically established the **Custody of the Holy Land**, entrusting it to the Franciscans, administered by the Father Custodian.

²² *Diario*, parte ii, 292.

²³ S. PANE, *Il Beato Giustino de Jacobis della Congregazione della Missione, Vescovo titolare di Nilopoli, primo Vicario Apostolico di Abissinia. Storia critica sull'ambiente e sui documenti*, Editrice Vincenziana, Napoli 1949, 407-408.

This double pilgrimage to Rome and Palestine proved more revealing than a course in theology. On 12 January 1842 they reached Cairo, paying a courtesy visit to the Patriarch Petros. On this occasion abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl obtained an official document from him, which licensed him to teach the twofold generation of Christ, eternal and temporal, and his anointing by the Holy Spirit. In the Egyptian capital they became aware that abuna Salāmā, contrary to the promise he had made to wait for them and make the journey together, had left for Abyssinia eight months before, in June 1841.

To be convinced only by evidence

Knowing full well the grave danger to which he was exposing himself, abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, in order to promote unity of faith among his co-religionists, headed for Gondar. He wished to hand over to abuna Salāmā the official document which he had received from the Egyptian Patriarch Petros, which authorised him to teach, as the official creed of the Abyssinian Church, the doctrinal definition of the real nature of the Word: "*We believe that Christ received the anointing of the Holy Spirit.*" In order to rescue him from the anger of the Abun, the empress Menen Leben Amede (1840-1853) had personally to intervene. The noisy failure of his plan, and the searing disillusionment which followed, decided the monk to take the crucial step, a decision which had been maturing, and to which he had been giving a lot of thought, for quite some time.

For abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, love of truth and the search for it, were the same thing as love of the true Church of Jesus Christ, and the search for it. In silence he held himself in a listening mode, and this interior waiting accustomed him to recognise the imperative from the Word. When he understood with absolute certainty that Catholicism was the natural development and legitimate complement of the Christian doctrine existing in the ancient Church of the beginning, abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl decided to join the Catholic Church.

In September 1843 abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl went to Adwa. There, after five months of mature reflection, a radiantly joyful abbā Yaqob Māryām received him into the small community of Catholics in that mission. The old *mamher* was welcomed into Christ's humble sheepfold, witnessing to the fact, without the slightest shadow of doubt, that a conscience which left itself open inevitably led in that direction. From that very moment his existence would be indissolubly linked with that of abbā Yaqob, a far-seeing father and reliable spiritual guide.

An able and loyal collaborator

In May 1844 abbā Yaqob, accompanied by Brother Abbatini and assistant missionaries abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl and abbā Melkisadek, began a reconnaissance tour of Tegrāy province in order to set up a new mission somewhere. After looking around for a long time abbā Yaqob finally bought some land in Gwala, on 10 December 1844, for the mission which he proposed to set up. This was in the Agamè region, and he bought the land from the Irob Bocnèito people.²⁴ His indigenous priests proved decisive as mediators in the purchase of this property. *"They graciously offered to their fellow-countrymen what would never have been conceded to de Jacobis."*²⁵ It was here that in June 1845 abbā Yaqob inaugurated the *College of the Immaculate Conception*, which served as seminary and college for the young men of the surrounding areas. The teaching of the seminarians was entrusted to abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, a task for which he was particularly suited: *"The Lord has filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge and with all craftsmanship, to undertake and carry out projects... for work in every kind of skilled craft... and he has inspired him to teach..."* (Ex 35:31-34). And the apostle Paul's good wishes for his beloved disciple Timothy may suitably be applied to abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, as if they came from the very heart of abuna Yaqob: *"Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers"* (1 Tim 4:16). Truth, mental enlightenment, invited his heart to follow, and became hidden strength; in this way the laborious apprehension of Truth turned into a coherent practice of Charity. Gabra Mikā'ēl came to understand that a person is not satisfied by knowledge alone, but wants to love; in other words, to be in a positive, and opportune, relationship with all he knows. In this way he becomes wise, achieving a vital synthesis of truth and virtue, and contributing to the genuine renewal of the society in which he lives.

Gwala, because of its favourable location and because of the diocesan seminary, would become, with the passage of time, the hub

²⁴ People noted for their generosity and hospitality. Although they were part of the mainly Islamic Saho nation, they were Christians *"As soon as we arrive among them, our cordial and hospitable Irob people always welcome us with a feast, and having spread out the ox hide for the meal in the place of honour in the Hovel... kindly invite us to accept this seat of honour"* (Epistolario, 792).

²⁵ S. ARATA, *Abuna Yakob. L'Apostolo dell'Abissinia (Mons. Giustino de Jacobis, C.M.) 1800-1860*, Annali della Missione, Roma 1934, 252.

of the apostolic activity of abbā Yaqob Māryām and the Vincentian missionaries. After Gwala had been set up came the turn of Alitiena, in the eastern part of Agamè province.

First imprisonment

Abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl resolved to love God above all things, and to follow Him unreservedly. For this very reason he took on the missionary responsibility of his faith, apostolic ministry. He continuously probed the mystery of salvation. In addition to this he recognised the indispensability of dogma, totally rejecting the reduction of the Christian faith to mere religious feeling.

He was not happy in the new seminary in Gwala because of on-going internal squabbles. He therefore asked for, and was granted, a change to Gondar in order to undertake an intense and systematic apostolate, helped by abbā Teklè Ghiorgis and the devoted layman Amariè Kenfū. Abuna Salāmā, secretly informed of the departure of the three missionaries from Adwa, had them arrested and thrown into prison. They remained imprisoned for ten weeks. Prison conditions were particularly hard on abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, who became infected with a painful condition from which he never recovered. Abbā Yaqob took the imprisonment of his faithful collaborators very hard, but at the same time was proud of them, because they had been successfully tested in their love of Christ. The prisoners would certainly have died if the *dagiyāt* Webiē had not intervened for their release. Once freed, they returned to Alitiena where the small Catholic community, led by abbā Yaqob, welcomed them as intrepid confessors of the faith.

Ordination to the Priesthood

The cruel imprisonment of abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, the brutal devastation of the Gwala mission and the growing insecurity in which the Catholic community was living, decided abuna Yaqob to ordain the elderly *mamher*, who was fifty-nine years old. (Abuna Yaqob had been secretly ordained bishop by Mgr Guglielmo Massaia, O.F.M.Cap., on 7 August 1847 in Massawa.) On 1 January 1851 the old monk received major orders and priesthood in Alitiena church, "on the title of Religious poverty in the Order of St Anthony the Abbot."²⁶ "... I have the courage to admit simply that I am proud of

²⁶ *Diario*, 913. Tonsure and minor orders had already been conferred on him on 28 December 1850: "Today, with first tonsure, we also conferred the four Minor Orders on Abba Ghebrè Michele" (ibid.).

this ordination, I cannot express with what strange pride. “... today I am very happy indeed to have ordained him, and at his being the first man to have been ordained by me.”²⁷ Meanwhile the situation was continuing to worsen, especially in the Agamè region, deciding abuna Yaqob to move even further north, towards Akkalaguzāy, which seemed to guarantee greater security and freedom of action. Halāy, located on a wide and beautiful plateau, was selected as the hub. Halāy, in fact, situated between Saganeiti and Addi Caieh, offered possibilities for missionary expansion, which the narrow and arid valley of Alitiena was unable to give.

In the re-assessment of the missions and the re-location of missionary personnel, necessitated by the problems of the moment, it was decided that Fr Biancheri, abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl and abbā Tekle Haymāot from Adwa,²⁸ would constitute a difficult, but necessary, missionary outpost in Gondar. Here abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl took up once again his ministry, which he had exercised on other occasions in the past, although with poorer results. He had, however, the happiness of receiving into the Catholic Church his former disciple the Negus Johannes III, followed shortly afterwards by three monks.

Abuna Yaqob’s scruples and abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl’s humility

Having given a lot of thought to serious and well-founded doubts about the validity of abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl’s baptism, abuna Yaqob had decided to confer all the sacraments on him, conditionally. For the bishop it was a real weight to be taken off his conscience, but for the old “*pseudo-priest*” a real gesture of humility and obedience. Abuna Yaqob left Halāy on 17 February and reached Gondar on the fourth of the following month.²⁹ On leaving Halāy he had an uneasy feeling that he was heading into dangers never previously encountered, and was now close to the supreme test of his fidelity to Christ and his Church (cf. Mt 10:39, 16:25, Mk 8:35, Lk 17:33, Jn 12:25, 15:13). In order to conceal from people that he was in the city, abuna Yaqob entered Gondar in the dead of night, in the company of his always faithful disciple abbā Teklē Haymānot of Gwala. After he had

²⁷ *Epistolario*, 1096; see also 1383.

²⁸ There were two men named Teklè Haymānot: a) a native of Adwa, called *junior* or *minor* (cf. *Epistolario*, 1111). He was a *fellow prisoner* of abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl and the *first biographer* of abuna Yaqob; b) the other one was from Gwala, and was called *senior* to distinguish him from the other man with the same name.

²⁹ “... I had to go to this Capital of the ancient Abyssinian Empire to regularise the ordination of an old native Catholic priest” (*Epistolario*, 1280).

baptised abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl and ordained him priest,³⁰ abuna Yaqob decided to stay on in Gondar until the situation was defused and attitudes calmed down.

Settling accounts

Kāsā Haylù, the future Emperor Tewedros II (1855-1868), rose rapidly to power by innumerable lightning military victories. It was not possible in Abyssinia to achieve political power without the backing of the religious authority. Kāsā and abuna Salāmā had need of each other. The long awaited moment of revenge for the *Abun* had at last arrived. Having been out of sight, for calculated political and opportunistic religious reasons, he returned in triumph, recalled by the powerful and feared *Negus Neghest* (the King of Kings).

On 4 July 1854 Kāsā and abuna Salāmā had a meeting in Gondar to abolish all the schools of Christology and impose on everyone belief in the sole divine nature of Christ. An imperial edict obliged the priests of all the churches, and the monks of all monasteries, to appear before the *Abun*, and each one to place in his hands the oath of acceptance of the official Church position. July 25th was fixed as the day for the solemn public ceremony. This was the occasion, which he had not expected, for the *Abun* to affirm his authority, whilst for Kāsā it was a good time for him to rid himself of Moslems and Catholics at one go. On the evening of July 25 Abuna Yaqob and all who were with him were arrested and thrown into prison. Abuna Yaqob was placed in a separate prison, whilst the others were chained in pairs and brutally tortured so that they would agree to the one creed. On 28 July the *ghend*³¹ was inflicted on abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl. All attempts by Abuna Yaqob to get himself put with the prisoners were unavailing. Their being separated was explicitly deliberate, so that the *frenji* (foreigner) would not incite the others to resist. The cruel suffering inflicted on the prisoners had a huge effect also on public opinion. Mgr Massaia, Vicar Apostolic of the Galla region, wrote about it to Pope Pius IX, who in turn wrote an

³⁰ "In Gondar therefore I had regularised the doubtfully conferred ordination of a priest" (ibid., 1298).

³¹ This was a horrible instrument of torture, one metre long and 35-40 cm thick, made of heavy hard wood, in which there were two large holes, through which the prisoner's feet were thrust. Then two wedges were inserted which had the effect of gripping the ankles so tightly as to dislocate them. As the prisoner was no longer able to stand up he was forced to remain seated or to lie flat.

Apostolic Brief to abuna Yaqob encouraging him, and all the prisoners, to remain steadfast in the faith.

On 27 November 1854 Kāsā and Salāmā decided to expel abuna Yaqob from the Empire. In order to be sure that the order would be implemented an armed escort was to accompany him to the frontier between the province of Sennar and Sudan, from where he would have returned to Italy, his homeland.

The supreme test

Tewodros' opponents gave way, one after the other, before his overwhelming power. To this invincible leader only one individual stood up, a skeletal little man, completely defenceless, abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl. At all costs he had to be trapped or eliminated once and for all. On 14 March 1855 Tewodros convened a solemn assembly of important persons, clergy and people, before whom the monk was to be finally arraigned. After his umpteenth refusal, the emperor gave orders for the old arrogant and stubborn monk to be scourged with a *jirate-kechine* (a giraffe tail) of hair as cutting as the sharpest razor blade: "... a thick whip which Abyssinians are accustomed to use on oxen yoked to a plough."³² The effect of the public whipping on a delicate body which had already been treated harshly was so devastating that his life was feared for.

The punishment decreed by the emperor went on for two hours, but was not successful in overcoming the monk's steely will, supported by an unbreakable faith. This irritating moral loss of face for Tewodros and abuna Salāmā was even more embarrassing than a politico-military upset or a schism. As the emperor had to set out on a new, and by no means final, military expedition, he ordered that abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl should follow him, on foot and in chains: "*The precursor of our Confessors, the illustrious old man, abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, was forced to follow the army, in chains.*"³³ The march was exhausting and debilitating for an already weakened physique, but in Christian logic love is always to give oneself, and giving oneself is to forget the self.

On 29 May 1855 the newly arrived English consul Walter C. Plowden turned up at the place where Tewodros and his army were encamped. After a hasty conventional welcome, revealing annoyance at the interruption, Tewodros took his revenge by inviting the consul to be present at the interrogation of abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, worn out

³² *Epistolario*, 1402.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1355.

physically but victorious morally. At the monk's umpteenth refusal to accept the official creed, the emperor requested from the judges a severe exemplary sentence, which would serve as a warning to all the prisoners. The judges found the popular *mamher* guilty of *lèse-majesté*, a crime which carried the death penalty. This sentence went beyond what the despotic Tewodros was expecting, but he ordered that the sentence be carried out at once. The British consul Plowden intervened on abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl's behalf, requesting the commutation of the death sentence to hard imprisonment for life. Tewodros consented to this totally unexpected plea from his guest, though with bad grace. Plowden had achieved his first diplomatic success, and could depart justly proud of it, because never before had it happened that peremptory orders of Tewodros were reversed.

When abuna Yaqob was told of his beloved disciple's unbudging firmness, he rejoiced in the depths of his being, even though he would have wished to be with him, sharing the suffering and humiliation. Sometimes death of the heart is more trying and insupportable than the severest physical suffering. As it was impossible for him to travel, abuna Yaqob arranged for short messages and small concrete gestures of solidarity to reach him: "*Best wishes to my good old man and newly ordained priest, Abba Ghebré Michele.*"³⁴

No one has ever given an account of abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl's final moments, so we are borrowing from the ancient "*gesta martyrum*," matching as far as possible with regard to circumstances and the element of drama: "United in chains with Christ Jesus, I hope to greet you, if God's will should judge me worthy to reach the goal. But I am afraid that your love for me may be dangerous if you speak in my favour to the authorities. It is easy for you to obtain what you want, but it would be difficult for me to reach God if you do not have compassion for me. I do not want you to please men, but God alone. In fact you are pleasing to Him. And I will not have any opportunity but this one to reach God. And even yourselves, if you keep quiet, would never be able to endorse a better work. If you keep quiet I will become a word of God; but if you take pity on my flesh I will once more be nothing but an empty sound. Leave me alone in this: may I be sacrificed to God while the altar is ready. Only then, united in love in a single chorus, sing to the Father, in Christ Jesus, since God has been kind enough to look *at this poor monk from Abyssinia*, calling him westwards from the Orient. It is beautiful for me to travel far from the world in order to rise again in Christ.... Only when the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1116.

world no longer sees anything of my body will I be Christ's disciple.... Now, in chains, I am learning not to desire anything else.... Through the maltreatment by the soldiers I become an evermore true disciple.... May fire, cross, wild beasts, torture, wounds, gashes, dislocations, mutilations, crushing of the entire body, the devil's most evil torments, come upon me provided I can meet Jesus Christ!... I seek Christ who died for us; I want Him who rose for us. The moment in which I will be born is imminent."³⁵

Abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl was by now no longer able to stay on his feet, weakened as he was by his long captivity and the cruel sufferings inflicted on him. He could no longer move, and even less ride. *"Even though he is in irons our incomparable Veteran in years and valour, Abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl, is still miraculous in his heroism."*³⁶

On 28 August 1855, at Tchiretcha Ghebabā, at the far limit of the borderland with the Wollo territory, the heroic confessor of the faith finished his long and difficult day. He was sixty-four years old. His martyrdom had lasted thirteen months and fourteen days, following his second arrest. He was buried in Berakit, near a huge stone, as if chosen without realising it to mark his resting place³⁷ as he awaits the final resurrection. A gigantic Abyssinian sycamore extended its shade and protective branches, as if to perpetuate in time abuna Yaqob Māryām's fatherly love for the best of his disciples and for the most precious and mature fruit of his apostolate in Abyssinia, which had become a land sanctified by the martyrs and confessors of the faith. *"Our indigenous priests are persecuted, imprisoned, brought before successors of Annas and Caiaphas.... We die with our priests.... Everyone here who is suffering for the faith recommend themselves to your prayers."*³⁸

In a long letter to his brother Dom Giuseppe, a professed monk in the Royal Carthusian monastery of St Martin in Naples, abuna Yaqob described Abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl's martyrdom admirably: *... our venerable septuagenarian Abba Ghebrè Michele, who accompanied me on my visit to you in your Carthusian monastery in 1841; later he was the first Priest ordained by me in Abyssinia. He, then, after a year of the most severe blows suffered for the faith, after being whipped to death by*

³⁵ Cf. *Letter of St Ignatius to the Christians of Rome*, 1-2; 4-6. The underlined italicised text has been altered by me; the original refers to "the bishop of Syria."

³⁶ *Epistolario*, 1359.

³⁷ In spite of all the efforts made in the past, the precise spot of his burial has never been found.

³⁸ *Epistolario*, 996-998.

four strong [men] on the eyes, on the most sensitive parts of the body, until the lictors were exhausted from whipping, the sufferer with his eyes split and healed instantaneously, as if miraculously, was forced to follow the tyrant on foot on his expedition, and died from all this... in chains.... Having thus earned the palm of martyrdom our revered Priest is consecrated **Protomartyr** of the restored faith in His Fatherland....³⁹

On 29 July, three years after the terrible events, abuna Yaqob Māryām notified the superior general of his Congregation of the tragic death of abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl. He wrote: "*I have added an epigraph in Latin to this picture of Abba Ghebré Michele the martyr,*⁴⁰ *in which I refer to him as a seminarist of the Congregation. In fact he was only a postulant, since the period of his vocation could be counted only from the moment when he would have begun his intern seminary; but at that moment he was already in prison; nonetheless, in his heart he already belonged to the Congregation.*"⁴¹ In another letter he used the words "*... the martyr Ghebré Michele, our novice.*"⁴²

We can borrow the words which St John gives to the angel of the church in Thyatira, in the marvellous vision which he had on the island of Patmos, because they can be applied to abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl; they seem to be a wonderful balance between his active life doing good and his ability to give the supreme form of witness: "*I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first*" (Rev 2:19).

³⁹ Ibid., 1482-83. The title **Protomartyr**, given by the Master and Father to his beloved son and disciple is authoritative.

⁴⁰ This important evidence from Justin establishes the existence of the only known portrait of Blessed Gabrā Mikā'ēl, and an exhaustive search in the archives should be able to bring it to light. There should be, however, more reproductions of this unique portrait, because in writing to the [Society for the] Propagation of the Faith in Paris de Jacobis expressed himself as follows: "*... the servant of God, whose portrait you are receiving with this, a portrait which has no merit other than... that of being the work of a young Abyssinian Catholic man, who has never studied drawing; and it is, in the end..., a sort of miraculous work, when it is looked at here because of its exact conformity and resemblance to the Martyr, its original*" (ibid., 1512-1513).

⁴¹ *Epistolario*, 1518. But already on 10 January 1856, writing to the Italian assistant general in Paris, Fr Pier Paolo Sturchi, Justin had used the following words: "*So, the already accomplished martyrdom... of our holy Abyssinian priest Abba Ghebrè Michele, should give a special joy to the double Family of St Vincent, since he had been admitted into it while in prison*" (ibid., 1379).

⁴² Ibid., 1534. At the request of de Jacobis abbā Gabra Mikā'ēl had been accepted by the superior general as a Vincentian novice, meaning a seminarist. During the negotiations with Fr Jean-Baptiste Etienne Gabra Mikā'ēl was imprisoned, and later died for the faith.

Official confirmation

In the name of the Church, Mother and Teacher of all peoples, Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) recognised the heroic virtues and martyrdom "*in odium fidei*" of abbā Gabra Mikā'el, beatifying him on 3 October 1926. This authoritative statement by the magisterium means for us that "*The Church follows Christ in a special way in the person of those who fight for the faith right up till death.*"⁴³ In one section it deals with the treatment meted out to the Martyrs over a period of two millennia: "*They loved everyone and were persecuted by everyone. They were unknown and they were condemned. They were sentenced to death, yet precisely by that they obtained life.... They were despised yet in being despised they found their joy. They were damaged in their reputation, whilst they gave witness to their innocence. They were insulted, and returned a blessing, they were treated with ignominy, and changed it into honour. Although doing good, they were treated as evildoers; when they were punished, they rejoiced as if they were given life.... But all those who hated them could not explain their opposition.... Christians love those who hate them.... Christians, exposed to sufferings, increase in number each day.*"⁴⁴

Jesus repeatedly taught, on various occasions: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:5); and again: "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son does not have life" (1 Jn 5:12). These statements are a sign of an unheard of audacity and contradiction. Whoever recognises Jesus becomes his disciple, whilst anyone who misinterprets him is far from the Way which leads to the Truth and so to Life. Jesus died on the cross so that this seeking would be rewarded with success.

But the drama did not end with Jesus. It continues right up to today in his disciples: "A servant is not greater than his master" (Jn 15:20); for this reason "... they will drive you out from the synagogues, and so the hour will come in which anyone who kills you will believe he is giving honour to God" (Jn 16:2).

So, this is what the promise of the Defender, whom Christ will send to his followers "from the Father" (cf. Jn 16:26), means. His mission is not merely to inspire the disciples in such a way that they know how to defend themselves before human tribunals (cf. Mt 10:20), but to take care of them when their faith will be put to severe testing. Because of the world's opposition to them, the

⁴³ ST AUGUSTINE, *Tracts on John*, Tract 124, 5, in C.C.L. 36, 685.

⁴⁴ *Epistle to Diognetus*, ch. 5-6; in Funk, 399-401. The great Tertullian has a similar expression: "*Sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum*" (*Apologeticum*, 50, 13; in C.C.L. I, 171).

disciples of Christ will be exposed to scandal, they will feel the temptation to desert, they will experience doubt and unease. And it is precisely at that moment that the Spirit of Truth will intervene. He will bear witness to Jesus in the intimate heart of his disciples, will confirm them in the faith and invite them to remain faithful under pressure. In that way, even they “will bear witness” to Jesus, in just the way that abbā Gabra Mikā’ēl, Christ’s faithful witness in Abyssinia, knew how to do it.

A favourable forecast, and a final prayer

The rich exchange of gifts between the Church of Rome and the ancient Church of Abyssinia is happily exemplified in St Justin de Jacobis and Blessed Gabrā Mikā’ēl. *Today* the church in Abyssinia breathes with two lungs, symbolised by the twofold rich traditions of East and West in these two authoritative witnesses of the faith.

We, the Christians of the West, ask the Vincentian Fathers and the Bishops’ Conferences of Ethiopia and Eritrea, to set out again, with determination on “*the canonical route*” for the hoped for canonization of Blessed Gabrā Mikā’ēl, martyr, because just as they were intimate friends during life “... *as they were united in our souls, by the union of belief, and more so by charity...*”⁴⁵ In this way they may help the two twin-sister Churches of Rome and Abyssinia to become One in Christ Jesus (cf. Jn 17:21 ff.). This is also abuna Yaqob Māryām’s hope, and it could not have been otherwise: “*We see about doing what we can, so that, with God’s help, with the closure of one plague on true Belief, there will be no opening of another one... no less pestiferous and lethal than the first.*”⁴⁶ And to end up “... *on the need to reunite in one single Fold under the care of the same Shepherd...*”⁴⁷ as Abuna Yaqob comments: “*What a lovely day! How I long to see it! Blessed are the eyes that will have seen it...*”⁴⁸

May the Father, so much loved by Abyssinians, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, borrow our eyes to see that time of union; these eyes of ours, if we wish it, may bring to realization the provocative but salutary prophecy of “*Ætiopum semper servus.*”

Translation: THOMAS DAVITT, C.M.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1330.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1115.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1037.

⁴⁸ Ibid.