The Jesuits in Africa

The Jesuit missions to Africa were concentrated in five different areas: Ethiopia, Egypt, the area of the Zambesi River, Angola and Cape Verde. But in contrast to the numbers who went to the New World and Asia, Africa received but a mite of the Jesuit manpower.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Angola was the main mission and the most durable. Through the munificence of benefactors, the Jesuits built a splendid church and an imposing college in Luanda, a city founded by the Portuguese. There, the Jesuits divided their forces between teaching grammar and literature and catechizing native tribes. Baltasar Barreira, S.J., (1538-1612) was particularly notable in this mission. His voluminous correspondence over 32 years provides valuable source material on Angola's early history. In 1604-08, the enterprising Fr. Barreira, with the aid of local chieftains, set up mission stations in the Cape Verde Islands, at Cape Verde, in Guinea, and Sierra Leone.

The impediments to success in African missionary lands were many and insuperable. War and slavery were two especially vexing problems, to say little of the debilitating climate of lands just fifteen degrees above the equator, and the crippling sicknesses which so inhibited the Jesuits and sent many of them to early graves. Jesuit links to colonial governments—with the French on Madagascar as well as with the British, the Boers, and the Portuguese in Southern Africa—were never understood by the Africans and thus were always suspect.

A bewildering aspect of the behavior of the Jesuits on the Zambesi in the late 19th century is their apparent naiveté about health hazards. Letters and reports indicate that they took hardly any precautions against fever or other illnesses. The Jesuits would certainly have known that quinine was the appropriate prophylactic to combat malaria, but their letters reveal that they rarely used quinine carefully or took the necessary rest when stricken. This is all the more bewildering in the light of so many diary entries of Jesuits who devoted many hours to providing health care to Africans.

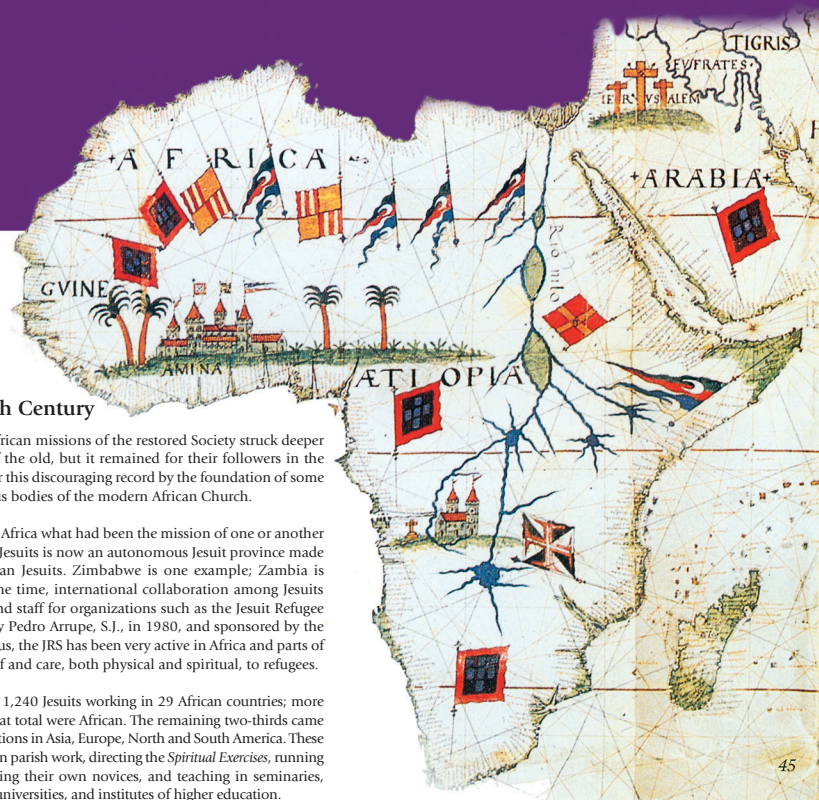
The Twentieth Century

By and large, the African missions of the restored Society struck deeper roots than those of the old, but it remained for their followers in the 20th century to alter this discouraging record by the foundation of some of the most vigorous bodies of the modern African Church.

In various places in Africa what had been the mission of one or another group of European Jesuits is now an autonomous Jesuit province made up mostly of African Jesuits. Zimbabwe is one example; Zambia is another. At the same time, international collaboration among Jesuits provides support and staff for organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service. Founded by Pedro Arrupe, S.J., in 1980, and sponsored by the entire Society of Jesus, the JRS has been very active in Africa and parts of Asia providing relief and care, both physical and spiritual, to refugees.

In 1990, there were 1,240 Jesuits working in 29 African countries; more than one-third of that total were African. The remaining two-thirds came from 20 different nations in Asia, Europe, North and South America. These Jesuits are involved in parish work, directing the *Spiritual Exercises*, running social centers, training their own novices, and teaching in seminaries, secondary schools, universities, and institutes of higher education.

Engelbert Mveng, S.J. (1930-95), one of the first promoters of African liberation theology, is considered by many to be the "father of the church" in Africa. This prophetic Jesuit voice at the heart of African theological research was assassinated in his home near Yaoundé in 1995. Throughout his life, Mveng fought for the dignity of African people who had suffered so much through slavery and colonization. The multi-talented Mveng—historian, poet, artist, philosopher, and theologian—served as the founding general secretary of AOTA (Ecumenical Association of African Theologians) and directed the department of history at the University of Yaoundé for many years.



In the Africa mapped by an unknown geographer in a planisphere of 1585, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, and, hypothetically, Abyssinian flags fill in the geographical blanks. Apart from a large city in Guinea set amid the palms and a church in Angola evangelized by the Portuguese Jesuits, there is only the course of a labyrinthine Nile originating from a constellation of lakes and pools.

— William V. Bangert, S. J., *A History of the Society of Jesus* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972)
— John Orr Dwyer in *The Jesuit Tradition in Education and Missions: A 450-Year Perspective*, Christopher Chapple, ed. (University of Scranton Press, 1993)
— Gianni Guadalupi, *The Nile: History, Adventure and Discovery* (White Star S.p.A., 2007)
— Mary Ann Hinsdale in *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)
— Thomas Worcester, S.J. in *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)
— Jonathan Wright, *God's Soldiers: Adventure, Politics, Intrigue, and Power* (Doubleday, 2004)

This first map of the *"Sources of the Nile (Blue)"* is taken from a 1730 edition of Fr. Jerome Lobo's book on Abyssinia. Note the broad spiral of the Abay Wenz that enters Lake Tana and completes a broad sweep before heading toward the Sudan in the north.

Jesuit Missionaries Identify the Source of the Blue Nile

"On the 21st of April 1619, I found myself there with the [Abyssinian] sovereign and all his army, climbed a hill and looked down with great attention. I saw two round springs, each of a diameter of about four palms, and I admired with immense joy that which neither Cyrus, King of Persia, Cambise, nor Alexander the Great and not even the famous Julius Caesar ever saw."

— Pedro Paez, S.J. writing of his adventure with the Ethiopians at the source of the Blue Nile

Few problems in geographical research exercised for so long a period so potent an influence over the imagination of man as that of the source of the Nile. The ancient Egyptians recorded the junction of the Blue and White Niles and this knowledge passed to the Persians and Greeks but despite exploration by the Greek historian, Herodotus (c. 484-420 B.C.) and Nero's first-century Roman centurions, in the fourteen centuries after Ptolemy, virtually nothing was added to the knowledge of the geography of the Upper Nile. It was not until the 17th century that the source of the Blue Nile was seen by a European. The heavens reserved that well deserved privilege for Pedro Paez, S.J. (1564-1622), a Spanish Jesuit missionary who departed for Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in 1589 but was captured by pirates and spent the next 14 years as a galley slave. When released in 1603 he continued on his way to convert the Emperor of Abyssinia and his people.

Fr. Paez was by any measure an extraordinary man. Priest, physician, architect, and explorer, he quickly won the confidence of the Ethiopian Negus (Emperor Susneyos), built the royal palace at Gondar and taught catechism to members of the royal family. But widespread rebellion against the Negus Susneyos followed the announcement of his intention to unite the Abyssinian church to Rome. Having seen the fruit of almost 20 years of toil in the remarkable conversion of the Negus, Paez died in May 1622. Disaster followed his passing. The man Pope Urban VIII sent as patriarch lacked the flexibility, historical perspective, and cultural breadth to appreciate the liturgical traditions of the Abyssinian Church. In 1632, the Negus, died professing himself a Roman Catholic, but with him passed the hopes of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia, for the new Negus, Basilides, forbade contact with the priests of Rome.

Some of the most interesting stories of the customs and traditions of Ethiopia in this period come to us from Fr. Paez and from a Portuguese Jesuit, Jerome Lobo, who visited ten years later. Lobo also traveled to the sources of the Nile and left a vivid description in his book of the rise of the river and its passage through Lake Tana. Some time later, the book was translated from Portuguese to French. In the 18th century, the great English lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, translated it from French to English and published it as A Voyage to Abyssinia (1733). Johnson's more dramatic version, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia (1759), takes its name from that of the Prince, Ras Stella, of Fr. Lobo's narrative.

The Scottish explorer, James Bruce (1730-94), explored the area around Lake Tana over 150 years later, and in November 1770 went to the spring from which the Blue Nile rises. He mistakenly believed that the Blue Nile was of greater historical importance than the White Nile, held that he was the first European to have discovered its source and publicly denounced Fr. Paez's travels up the Blue Nile as a fabrication. Upon his return to Europe, James Bruce was mortified to find that, while he was still in Egypt, J. B. D'Anville, cartographer to Louis XV, King of France, had (in 1772) issued a new edition of his map of Africa in which, by a careful study of the writings of Paez and Lobo, he had anticipated Bruce's discoveries. D'Anville's map is singularly accurate. To Bruce, nevertheless, belongs the honor of being the first European to trace the Blue Nile to its confluence with the White Nile.

— William V. Bangert, S. J., *A History of the Society of Jesus* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972)
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