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the Congo Was Converted

Belgian Missionary Work in Central Africa

For most Flemish people, the history shared by Belgium and an enormous territory in Central Africa begins with Leopold II. Few of them are aware that long before then Flemings and Netherlanders had been active in the area now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1482 the Portuguese Diogo Cao discovered the estuary of the River Zaire and made contact with the BaCongo people who lived along its banks. The evangelisation of the country, entrusted to various religious orders and members of the secular clergy, began in 1491. Although it enjoyed some initial success, the enterprise threatened to become bogged down because of the heavy toll in lives and the inhospitable nature of the territory. To prevent this, the Congolese king approached the Pope in 1618 with a request for missionaries from the Capuchin order.

More than a quarter of a century was to pass before the first members of the order disembarked in the black kingdom. None of them came from the Low Countries. The Portuguese, who had ruled the roost there for over a century and a half, had no wish to see immigration from other European countries. Particularly unwelcome were subjects of the Spanish crown, who at the time included the inhabitants of the Low Countries. This situation



In 1482 the Portuguese Diogo Cao discovered the estuary of the River Zaire. He left these inscriptions on the rocks at M'Poza.

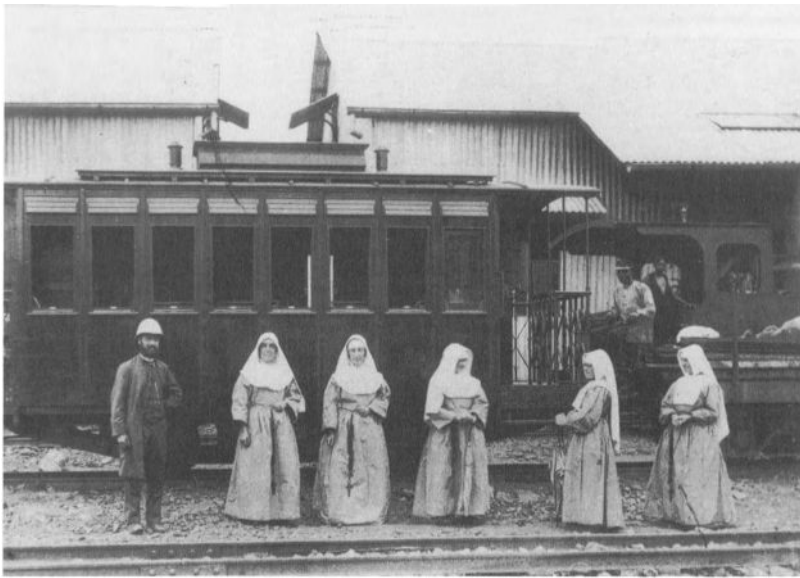
changed after 1641. As early as 1597, attempts at colonisation were made by groups from the Low Countries, referred to in the sources sometimes as Netherlanders, sometimes as Flemish. In any case, it appears that the majority of them were Protestants. Their power in the region grew steadily until in 1641 a fleet from Holland landed near Luanda and promptly occupied the entire coastal area. The power and influence of the Netherlanders became so great that Lisbon's authority was effectively ended. On the religious front it meant that Calvinist missionaries soon became active in the region and Catholicism lost its monopoly. Although the Flemish had previously been unwelcome in Portuguese territories because of their subjection to the Spanish crown, it now seemed advisable to send some to the region as missionaries. As Dutch speakers they would be well-qualified to mediate between the Catholic mission and the Calvinist authorities. That explains why by 1651 a number of Flemish Capuchins were working in the old Kingdom of Congo. The best-known of them is undoubtedly Joris van Geel, who was born in Oevel in 1617 and eventually murdered in a village by native converts after setting fire to traditional religious paraphernalia. Among Africanists his name is associated with the earliest known dictionary of a Congolese Bantu language. His annotations to the dictionary, which contain numerous references to his personal experiences and discoveries, are an important source of concrete information about missionary work at that time. In 1835 an anticlerical regime came to power in Portugal and proclaimed the abolition of all the religious orders active in Portuguese territories. This, together with the fact that civil war was making the region unsafe, led to the return of the Capuchins to Europe.



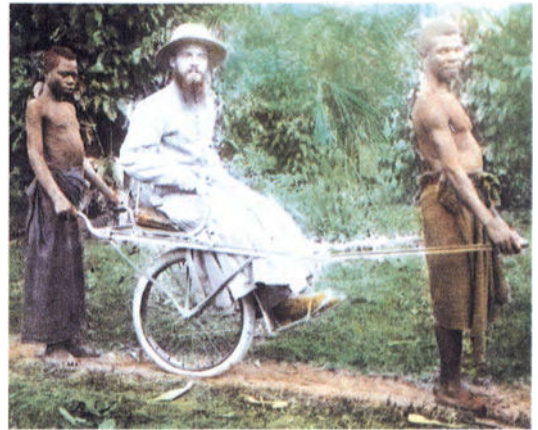
The Flemish Capuchin Joris van Geel, (1617-1652), killed in a village by native converts after he set fire to their traditional religious paraphernalia. Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, Tervuren.

Belgian missionaries

It was not until 1865 that European Christians showed a renewed interest in evangelising the area. The first to do so was the originally French Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the Spiritans, followed hesitantly by other religious organisations. Meanwhile, through much diplomatic string-pulling the Belgian King Leopold II, who had had his eye on the territories for a number of years and had them surveyed at his own expense, succeeded in obtaining official recognition for his aspirations. In 1885 he proclaimed the birth of the Congo Free State and was granted permission by the Belgian parliament to assume the Congolese crown. Competition between the Western European nations was fierce at the time; all of them were equally greedy for a slice of the African cake. Seen in that light, it is understandable that Leopold was keen to ensure that, as far as possible, the missionaries in his territories should be exclusively Belgian. He even undertook a, largely successful, diplomatic offensive aimed at expelling the French Spiritans from the Free State. They were replaced by members of the mainly Belgian Scheutist Congregation and the massive involvement of the Belgian churches in Central Africa dates from that time. After the Scheutist missionaries (1888), who also supplied the first Apostolic Vicar for the new Congolese vicariate, other Congregations quickly established themselves on Congolese soil: Sisters of Charity from Ghent (1892), Jesuits (1893), Trappists (1894), Sisters of our Blessed Lady from Namur (1894), Priests of the Sacred Heart



Departure of the Sisters of our Blessed Lady and Jesuits on 23 July 1893. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Leuven.



A pioneering missionary in his *pousse*. Archief Paters van het Onbevleete Hart van Maria (Scheut), Brussels.

(1897), Norbertines from Tongerlo (1898), Redemptorists (1899), Brothers of the Sacred Heart (1904), Brothers of the Christian Schools (1909) etc. Since Protestant missionaries were not subject to any centralised institution that could be influenced by diplomatic initiatives, Leopold had far less control over them. But from the outset there were almost as many Protestant missionaries, mostly of Anglo-Saxon origin, as Catholic.

Leopold's intention was to make the Free State first economically viable, then profitable. To achieve this the enormous territory had to be occupied and then opened up to Western civilisation, and what he mainly expected of missionaries was that they should play a leading role in achieving this last goal. However, the Congolese Free State did not survive very long. The interests of the great European powers were not served by allowing Leopold to succeed. Rumours about abuses perpetrated by whites on the native population in building railways and tapping rubber gave France, Germany and especially England a welcome pretext to unleash a smear campaign against Leopold which would eventually destroy the humanitarian and philanthropic image that Leopold had built up. Pressure from international as well as

The Jesuits Liagre, Hanquet and Oddon with two lay assistants and two natives. Archief Paters Jezuiten, Brussels.



Father Mon Verbruggen and his boy scouts in Ntambwe Saint Bernard near Luluaburg. Archief Paters van het Onbevleete Hart van Maria (Scheut), Brussels.

domestic public opinion finally compelled him to give up his Central African kingdom. On 18 October 1908 the territory became a Belgian colony. After the First World War, Belgium took on additional responsibilities in Central Africa; on 21 August 1919 parts of the former German colonial territories to the east of Congo, notably Rwanda and Burundi, were mandated temporarily to Belgium. For the next fifty years a small Western European country would determine the fate of an area eighty times greater than the mother country and separated from it by thousands of miles. Congo became an independent Republic on 30 June 1960; Rwanda and Burundi followed two years later.

Originally, all missionaries had been members of religious congregations or organisations. But at the end of the 1950s an older tradition was revived whereby diocesan priests from Western countries were also sent out to missionary lands, the so-called *Fidei Donum* priests, named after an encyclical of Pope Pius XII (1957) that strongly encouraged the practice. The Belgian missionaries who departed for Central Africa, both at the time of the Free State and the Colony as well as after independence, had widely differing perceptions of the task that faced them. Many factors contributed to this diversity. Not only did each of the various congregations and institutions have its own specific appeal and forms of spirituality, individual missionaries also differed according to their country, region and language of origin as well as their own particular psychological make-up. Furthermore, views about theology and evangelism changed constantly throughout the period, while the missionaries themselves often developed new ideas and ap-

proaches between their arrival in Africa and the time when they either died or returned permanently to the mother country. Finally, perceptions of the relationship between Western states and churches and the non-Western world evolved in step with political, economic and social change. Consequently, the missionaries who worked in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi during this period cannot be regarded as a single undifferentiated and homogeneous group.

More than religion

An exceptionally large proportion of the region's contingent of missionaries came from Flanders. For example: in 1955, 65% of the primarily French Congregation of White Fathers working in the area were Flemish; of the Brothers belonging to the Congregation, 80% came from Flanders. It is probable that the percentages were even higher in a Congregation such as the Scheutists (the Immaculate Heart of Mary), not to speak of the smaller, mainly female, congregations that only recruited in Flanders. The objective of the missions was to spread the Christian gospel among peoples who had never, or in the case of the BaCongo had hardly, heard it before. The missionaries committed themselves to that goal in the firm conviction that their message was universal and uniquely relevant to all. However, the term 'preaching' which is usually employed to describe this type of activity can easily give rise to a one-sided and therefore incomplete and misleading impression of what the missionaries actually did. All of them were agreed that what mattered most was to preach the Gospel, teach the catechism, administer the sacraments, celebrate the liturgy and teach the principles of Christian morality to their converts. But these specifically religious tasks were preceded, accompanied and followed by a whole range of other activities that often consumed far more, indeed the lion's share, of their time and energy.

The first of these was the organisation of education which, almost until the end of the colonial era, the State left almost entirely in the hands of the Catholic Church. In fact, a kind of division of labour between Church and State developed fairly rapidly. The Church took responsibility for intellectual and moral education and also the medical care of the native population, in exchange for which the State offered the missionaries security and protection and provided the essential infrastructure. It also paid a small subsidy for schools that met the syllabus requirements laid down by the State. Initially this programme was confined to primary education, but later on technical and secondary education was developed and teacher training colleges and art colleges were set up. The educational efforts of the Church were crowned in 1954 by the opening of the University of Lovanium as a daughter institution of the Catholic University of Leuven. The following figures give an impression of the expansion of education in Congo in the colonial period. In 1935, there were 13,299 educational institutions in the colony, of which only 11 were set up by the state. A mere twenty years later, in 1957, the number had risen to no less than 30,514, of which 386 were independent of the missions. In the same period, the Congolese school population trebled from 599,601 pupils in 1935 to 1,732,769 in 1957. That

means that at the end of the colonial period 10% of the population had completed primary school, while in Ghana, one of the best regulated of the English colonies, the figure was only 7% and in French Equatorial Africa only 3%. Africans who had been to school could join the army or be recruited as teachers, minor civil servants or clerks in large and small businesses. There were also specialised mission schools that produced large numbers of both male and female nurses and teachers. Furthermore, the Church did not neglect the training of native clergy, for which a number of minor and major seminaries were founded. The first priests in Congo and Rwanda were ordained in 1917. The first Episcopal consecration took place in 1952 when Mgr A. Bigirimwami became Bishop of Nyundo in northern Rwanda. This was followed four years later by the consecration of Mgr J. Malula, who eventually became Archbishop of Kinshasa and the first Congolese Cardinal.

The second task entrusted to the missionaries was health care. With financial and manpower support from the State, they established a network of medical institutions, ranging from unsightly dispensaries, clinics, field hospitals and leper houses to modern well-equipped hospitals, specialist centres for the blind, deaf, physically and mentally handicapped and psychiatric institutions. At the end of the colonial period in the Belgian Congo there were 4.4 beds per 1000 inhabitants compared with 2.7 in French Equatorial Africa, 1.2 in Kenya and 0.4 in Nigeria.

As well as education and health the missionaries also busied themselves in other fields of social development and services. Among these were their numerous and sustained initiatives and efforts in developing agriculture and animal husbandry, setting up orphanages, printing presses and publishing houses, and in some places even building bridges and roads. Several missionaries took an interest in the language, oral traditions, mentality, morality and customs as well as the pre-colonial history of the people among whom they lived, and emerged as pioneers of the region's linguistics, ethnography and ethno-history. J. van Wing, L. de Beir, N. van Everbroeck, P. Tempels, T. Theuws, G. Hulstaert, P. Boelaert, A. van der Beken and L. Verbeek are but a few names among many. They organised study days, even weeks, founded specialist journals and published the results of their research in learned books and articles.

Catholic and African

Such a wide range of activities was only possible because the missions could entrust much of the work of evangelisation in the strict sense of the word to an army of highly motivated and dedicated native catechists who took upon themselves the responsibility of spreading the Christian message. Through preaching and catechesis in the smallest and most remote villages they prepared the people for the sacraments and taught them the principles of Christian living. Often the Christian message and Catholic morality clashed with deeply rooted beliefs and the spontaneous inclinations of the African population. This was aggravated by the fact that only gradually and belatedly was it accepted that in conveying Christian belief and ethics some account should be taken of the individual cultural character of the African



Mgr J. Malula became Archbishop of Kinshasa in 1959.

peoples. A great pioneer of this approach, who acquired an international reputation, was Placied Tempels, a Flemish missionary in Katanga from 1933 to 1946 and 1950 to 1962. His book *Bantu Philosophy* (Bantoe Filosofie), first published in 1946, was translated into many languages and secured him a firm place in the history of African philosophy. He particularly wanted to apply his theoretical insights to missionary and pastoral work. With that aim he drew up a Bantu catechism and in the 1950s founded a spiritual movement within the Catholic church, the *Jamaa*, which would allow the Congolese to become Catholic without totally abandoning every aspect of their own culture and way of thinking. Even today, the *Jamaa* remains one of the most remarkable and profound attempts to give Christianity an authentic and original African countenance. His ideas and activities were far ahead of his time, and his presence gave rise to so many tensions that in April 1962 he had to leave the Congo at the age of only 56. Shortly after that, the Western missionary effort was plunged into deep crisis. The number of active Belgian Catholic missionaries in Congo had at first risen steadily. In 1903 there were 244, in 1924 1,013, in 1935 2,358, in 1949 4,559. But this trend went into reverse in the mid-1960s. By 1982 there were only 2,233 Belgian missionaries in Congo; in 1994 their number had dropped to 1,161 and in 2000 there were a mere 596. The causes of this decline in missionary dynamism in Belgium and Flanders are many and complex. It has undeniably had negative effects, but on the other hand it has not been entirely without positive consequences for the African Church. The Church in Central Africa has increasingly been compelled to stand on its own feet. Free of colonial reflexes and paternalistic tutelage, it now has the chance to develop its own identity and build a form of Christianity in which African Christians can feel comfortable, not just as Christians but also as Africans. Furthermore, they now face the challenge of becoming missionaries themselves.

VALFER NECKEBROUCK
Translated by Chris Emery.



A procession in Kisantu.
Archief Paters Jezufeten,
Brussels.