

CATHOLICISM IN AFRICA

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THIS brief introduction to the African number of BLACK-FRIARS can only suggest some lines of thought in regard to the progress and future of Catholicism among the African peoples. The following notes relate to the territories under British administration which lie between the Sahara and the Zambesi. The first and in some respects the happiest impact of the Catholic Faith on the African mind belongs to the period of the pioneer missionaries, largely French in their personnel and to an even greater extent French in their direction, working in a series of wholly tribalised societies. In those areas where there existed a powerful and hereditary chiefship it was often not difficult for the missionary to persuade the chief and his councillors that his coming offered no threat to established African authority. Speaking generally, the chief did not himself become a Catholic, but he was the missionary's equal and friend and the recipient of much wise advice. It was within this framework that there was built up the system of catechists and the practice of giving such teaching to the children as was necessary to enable them to lead a Catholic life. It may be said that the survival of tribalism and its modern counterpart, the sense of African nationhood, are conditions favourable to the development of the Catholic Church in Africa. Detribalism on the other hand is inevitably unfavourable and no group is more in need and less accessible than the detribalised urban proletariat.

No religion will appeal to the African who is still working on the land unless it respects ancient traditions and is not inimical to his pride of nationhood, whether that be Ibo or Yoruba, Baganda, Bahaya, Kikuyu or Chagga. This national consciousness should never be impeded either in the African priest or in the African layman. It is unnecessary to say that the development of an African priesthood is in the strict sense of the word essential. In this matter Africa owes the greatest debt to Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI. If, however, a strong local priesthood is to be built up, it is necessary that this should be formed from the general body of the population. The future priests should remain throughout

their lives connected with their clan group or village unit, thus acknowledging their place in African society. It is true that certain practical difficulties may arise through the family considering that they have a right to support from that member of their stock who has been raised to priestly rank. This matters little compared with the disadvantages that result when priests are recruited from mission orphanages and have no true place in their own community.

In this connection it may be said that the traditions of the *petit seminaire* are not without their drawbacks when transferred to Africa. Holidays for seminarists are as necessary in Africa as in Europe and there is always the danger that years of unbroken foreign tutelage may produce a clergy ignorant of the life of their own country. This is happily avoided by the experienced missionary societies. The development of the body of African priests is in fact the most encouraging feature of Catholic life in that Continent. Their devotion to the Holy See is profound, and in general they reflect very perfectly both the economic anxieties and the national aspirations of the African peoples.

A principal factor in the African rural scene is the teacher. Care has been taken to secure for the mission teacher equality of salary, pensions and housing with his colleague in Government service: the missions that have taken this matter up strongly have reaped their reward. In many areas the teacher has replaced the catechist as the chief Christian in the village community. In any case the teaching of religion to the children now depends chiefly upon him. The personality of the education secretary is of importance to each teacher. In matters relating to the transfer of teachers and in all similar questions the decision rests in most vicariates with the priest who holds this post. In this connection the practice of training African priests to act as assistant education secretaries has much to commend it. The type of organisation described, with in some parts a new type of better-trained and better-paid catechist, is typical of the rural areas in East and West Africa.

A factor throughout all these countries is the increasing significance of the educated Africans. All will be well if the members of this class are approached in a spirit of equal friendship. The younger members of the grouping in the big towns need individual care such as a university chaplain can give to his students. It is hoped that the work of the Dominicans in Lagos will do

much to assist that section of the African population in Nigeria.

The greatest difficulty is the problem created by the growth of great urban populations. It is axiomatic that the priest must live in the midst of his people. This is simple in West Africa, and can and must be arranged for in East and Central Africa likewise. We can never accept the segregation of the priest from his flock. East and Central Africa is—considering its size—an empty land which pours its available man-power into industry. These industrial areas vary greatly in their characters and management. But in dealing with race injustice, where this exists, the traditional religious bodies are ill-equipped on account of the favours that they receive from the State. The Catholic clergy, and those of the Presbyterians and the Church of England, have all the privileges of Europeans and it will be increasingly hard in industrial areas towards the South to persuade the African masses that their interests are bound up with their own. Even now they are represented as the fourth wheel of the White Man's chariot.

It appears that it is only messianic teaching which appeals to so many Africans in poor conditions. Except in country districts the fine churches and mission buildings no longer exercise an attraction on the people. They are as meaningless to them as is Notre Dame de Paris to the working class of the French capital. They are evidence of a profound separation between the lives of the priests and those of the masses in the locations. By contrast the emissaries of the Watch Tower and other similar teaching bodies are poor men and Africans. This seems the reason for the success of the immediate and explicit promises set forth by Judge Rutherford and his disciples. There is a future for all those who set out in direct language the punishment that will be incurred by the oppressors of the African race. It is needless to say much of Communism, for the appeal of that doctrine to an industrial proletariat has been already stressed by commentators. The Catholic Church is in great need of a new Saint Francis who would come to serve the Africans in their industrial setting. He would come freed from every privilege and would bring with him the charity of Christ.