



Five Faces of St. Justin de Jacobis

by Robert P. Maloney, CM

with passages from Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.
and Rev Thomas Johnston, S.J., M.A.

A Model for Vincentians

“ If I had to pick a single Daughter of Charity to present to the sisters as a model, I would pick Rosalie Rendu. If I had to pick a single missionary to present to the confreres, I would pick Justin de Jacobis. Few missionaries have been as closely identified with their people as he was. His letters are filled with wisdom, deep pastoral charity, and a profound sensibility toward the people whom he served.”

- **Robert P. Maloney, CM**

“ Justin de Jacobis recognized at the beginning of his work in Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia) that missionary messages must take root and blossom within the deepest values of each culture. Authentic and lasting cultural change occurs in respecting local culture, when external elements arrive with an understanding and respect for diversity.”

- **Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.**



St. Justin de Jacobis
(October 9, 1800 – July 31, 1860)
Feast Day: July 31

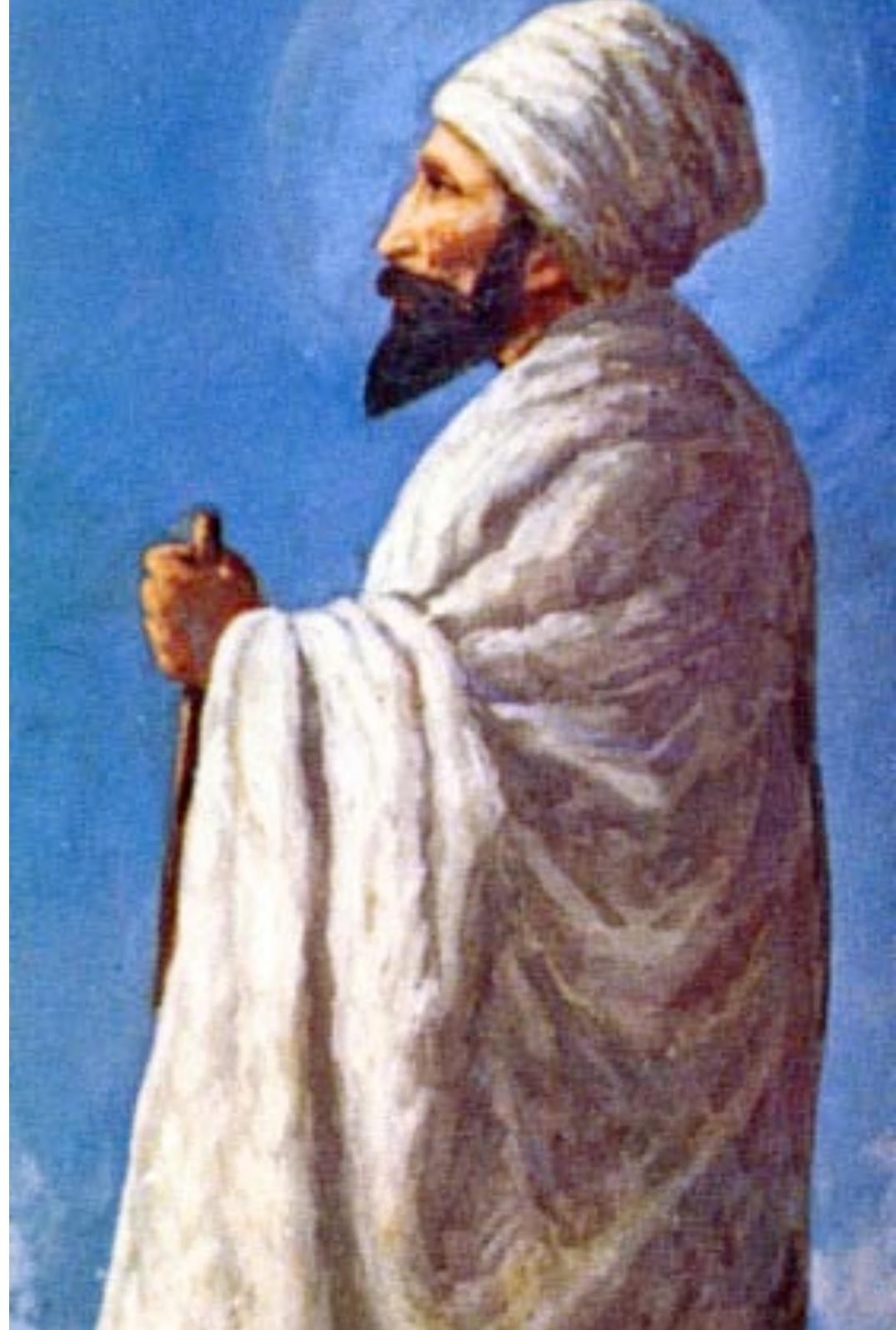
1. An Ethiopian to the Ethiopians, an Eritrean to the Eritreans

Fr. Robert Maloney recalls: “A few years ago I was driving with two friends through the hills outside Rome near Frascati. There we discovered a pretty little church hidden among the trees. We decided to visit it. Inside, to my great surprise, I found a statue of St. Justin De Jacobis. While I was explaining to my friends who he was and what he had done, an Ethiopian Capuchin came up from behind and asked me: ‘Do you know our saint?’ I remained struck by the words ‘our saint’. This would surely have been the way in which St. Justin himself would have wanted to be remembered.”



1. An Ethiopian to the Ethiopians, an Eritrean to the Eritreans

In his discourse to the Christians of Adwa, Justin said of himself: “Who possesses this heart of mine? God and the Christian people of Ethiopia. You are my friends, you are my family, you are my brothers and sisters, you are my father, you are my mother... I shall always do what pleases you. Do you want me to stay in this region? I shall stay here. Do you want me to go away from here? I shall leave. Do you want me to be silent? I shall be silent... Do you want me to celebrate Mass? I shall do so. Do you not want it? I shall not celebrate. Do you want me to hear confessions? I shall do it. Do you not want me to preach? I shall not preach.”



1. An Ethiopian to the Ethiopians, an Eritrean to the Eritreans

Fr. Robert Maloney tells the story: “An Ethiopian seminarian with whom I lived in the United States paid St. Justin the ultimate compliment. He told me that he had known about Justin De Jacobis for more than 15 years when he was a boy at home and when he was in the minor seminary. But it was only when he went to the university that he realized that Justin was an Italian! Justin was so inculturated and so rooted in the hearts of the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea that this young man had taken it for granted that he was ‘one of us’.”



2. Formator of the Clergy

Unfortunately, many missionaries who went to new territories did not see the need for forming an indigenous clergy. Many tried to transplant a European-type church from their native countries to mission lands and to convince their hearers to become Catholics, *modo europeo*, but they failed to root the Catholic Church within the cultural context of the people. Justin was determined not to commit the same mistake and focused his energies on the formation of native clergy. He wrote to his superiors: “It is more fruitful and successful to deal with the native priests than with the European missionaries who are not familiar with the local and social cultures of the native people.”



2. Formator of the Clergy

Quickly impressed by the intellectual capacity of the seminarians and their knowledge of the local languages and social context, Justin devoted himself energetically to their formation. The students, for their part, saw the dedication, love, and availability of their formator. Because of the mutual respect that grew up, many seminarians remained loyal to Justin throughout his life, overcoming all sorts of obstacles and even persecution. The native clergy prepared by De Jacobis became the backbone of the Catholic community. Justin valued his native priests highly. He stated: “They are my eyes, my mouth, my hands and my feet. They do what I cannot do and they do better than me what I do myself ...”



2. Formator of the Clergy

Justin's main opponents were some of the Orthodox clergy. Yet, he persistently continued to love and respect them. The door of his residence stood open to them. His interest was unity, which he believed to be largely present already. He refused to be drawn into futile theological discussions. He would not allow his confreres or his students to criticize them. When the Orthodox clergy allowed him, he joined them in their prayer and liturgical services, as well as social gatherings. From his side, Justin invited some of the Orthodox to teach his students liturgical music and prayers. He visited many of their monasteries in order to deepen his knowledge of their formation and their way of life.



2. Formator of the Clergy

St. Justin, in an attempt to resolve the shortage of Catholic priests, planned to send some of his seminarians to Egypt for further training and ordination to the priesthood. However, Guglielmo Massaia, who would later become cardinal, had just arrived as Apostolic Prefect of the southern part of Ethiopia. He visited Guala in 1846 and the following year ordained new priests and received into the Catholic Church others who had been exercising their ministry in the Orthodox Church. There were 15 altogether. This event gave tremendous momentum to De Jacobis' apostolic efforts. The new Catholic priests were assigned to different villages and the Catholic faith began to thrive.



2. Formator of the Clergy

During Justin's ministry 35 Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholic priests were ordained, 18 celibate and 17 married. He was concerned about the formation of these diocesan priests right to the end. On July 31, 1860, just three hours before his death, he gathered his disciples around him and told them: "...I say good-bye to you. Drive far from your house all calumny and bickering, love one another, remain firm in the faith and above all, practice charity. Be the light of your people." He called the seminarians to his bedside and said: "Since God has chosen you, be careful to follow the true path. I propose to you as your models the monks. They are good and they are the light which illuminates you. Follow their example."



3. Fully Inculturated

More than a century before the word “inculturation” became popular, Justin was a master of the art. He said to his listeners: “If you should therefore ask me who I am, I shall answer: ‘I am a Roman Christian who loves the Christians of Ethiopia.’ And if anyone should question you: ‘Who is this stranger?’, answer: ‘He is a Roman Christian who loves the Christians of Ethiopia more than his mother and more than his father; he has left his friends, his family, his brothers, his father and mother in order to come to visit us and to show his love for us.’”



3. Fully Inculturated

Justin carefully recorded his impressions in his diary and also wrote lengthy accounts to his superiors in Rome and in Paris. This documentation provides us with a priceless record of mid-nineteenth-century Ethiopians customs, described with a concern for detail found only in someone who loves what he is describing. He gives information about countless matters, like dress, funerals, marriages, teaching methods, punishments, and even surgical procedures. His diary is illustrated with sketches of persons, places, and things he has seen.



3. Fully Inculturated

Just three areas in which St. Justin's sensibility toward his people led him to become inculturated in their ways:

1. Justin studied hard and learned well the languages of his people.
2. Without much hesitation, Justin adopted the dress of the Ethiopian priests.
3. Contrary to the practice of many other missionaries, he adopted the Ethiopian rite and allowed his new disciples to continue their Orthodox devotions, even after they had accepted the Catholic faith. He did not demand that Ethiopian priests be ordained a second time in the Latin rite. He left priests free to use the liturgical books they had always used.



4. Friend of Ghebre Michael

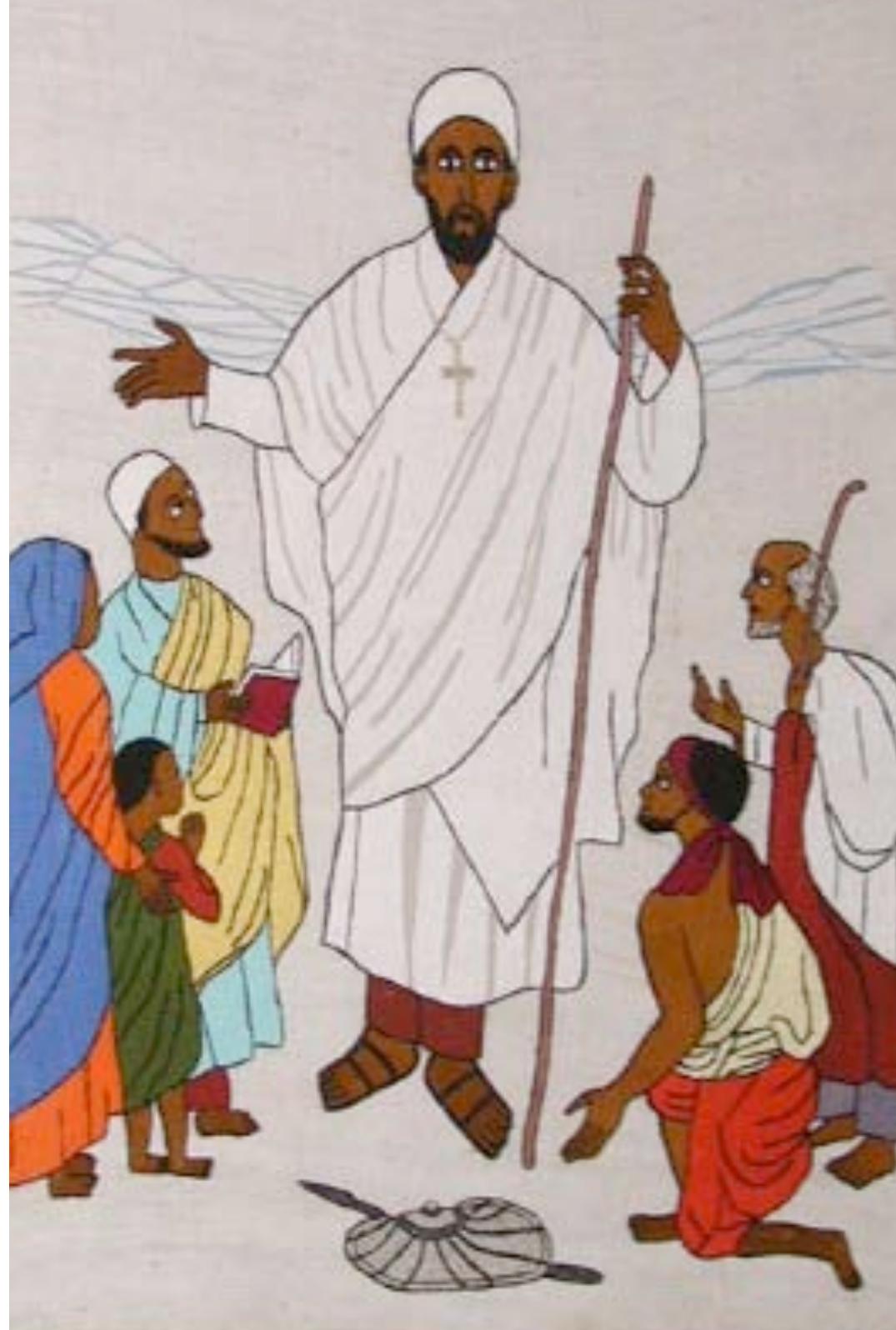
Ghebre Michael was a pilgrim in life, a relentless truth-seeker. He became a monophysite monk at the age of 19 (monophysites hold that in the person of Jesus Christ there is only one nature-- wholly divine or only subordinately human-- not two), but remained restless in his search for the truth. He made a long pilgrimage from Ethiopia to Cairo, to Rome and to Jerusalem and on it met Justin De Jacobis for the first time. In Rome he found himself very attracted to the Catholic Church. Arriving back in Ethiopia, he was persecuted by the orthodox because of his Catholic leanings and escaped to Adwa, where Justin received him with open arms. In 1844 Ghebre Michael declared his allegiance to the doctrine of the two natures in Christ and became a Catholic. Justin ordained him in 1851, when he was 60 years of age.



5. Deeply human, deeply holy

His Human Warmth

There was a tenderness in Justin that struck others forcefully. He felt things deeply. His sermons are filled with warmth and compassion. He often spoke of his love for his people. In his Diary he writes about his mother who, he was certain, was interceding for him in heaven. He tells of his loneliness as he celebrated Christmas almost alone in 1839. He describes the pain he felt at being separated from his fellow missionaries: "See how Providence makes us experience today all the torments of mortal separation. ... Our hearts are made for loving each other." Justin had the gift of friendship. He befriended not only his confreres and the Catholics of the mission, but many of the Orthodox and Protestant missionaries laboring in Ethiopia.



5. Deeply human, deeply holy

His Works of Charity

While still in Italy, Justin focused on the sick and poor in his ministry. In 1836 and 1837 a cholera epidemic raged in Naples. Justin labored day and night to assist the victims. He forgot himself to such an extent that he often neglected to eat and sleep. In Ethiopia too, he recounts in his Diary (I, 147) visits to the homes of sick people whom others refused to approach because of fear of contagion. On the mission, St. Justin made his residence a place of welcome. There the sick, the hungry and the poor often sought him, and he ministered to them with great tenderness. From there, he also went out to visit the homebound and the aged. As a Vincentian he was convinced of the importance of preaching by “word and work”. He formed his native clergy to do so too.



5. Deeply human, deeply holy

His Devotion to Mary the Mother of God

During his first year in Adwa, Justin gave out Miraculous Medals to everyone he met, telling them how Mary was the Mother of God and the Mother of all who believed in Christ. He engaged in much charitable ministry in the name of Mary. His listeners not only noted what Justin told them about Mary, they also observed how he honored her and prayed to her. Because of this, they called him Abba Yakob Zemariam, which means Mary's Jacob.



“I hand you the key to my heart...”

Listen to the words with which St. Justin introduced himself to the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea:

“The mouth is the door to the heart. Speaking is the heart’s key. When I open my mouth I unlock the heart’s door. When I speak to you I hand you the key to [my] heart. Come in and see that the Holy Spirit has planted in my heart [...] a great love for the Ethiopian Christians.”



He Was Very Much an Itinerant Missionary

In his mission of evangelization, St. Justin traveled from place to place. During his twenty years of preaching in Eritrea and Ethiopia, he covered thousands of kilometers, visiting large and small villages. After he established a mission station, he would entrust its administration to one of his priests or seminarians, and he would move on to new towns and new people to evangelize. As soon as he arrived in a new place, Justin would rent one or two small local residences for himself and for those traveling with him. Then he would invite the local people to visit him, to talk with him, and to pray with him as well.



Vincentian Virtues

Justin preached the gospel in such a simple way that his listeners readily understood his message. They recognized his goodness at the same time. Wherever he went, he preached by word and work, showing great concern for the sick and the poor, and encouraged the small communities he founded to lead lives of integrity and fidelity to their beliefs. By the witness of their lives, Justin and his followers earned the respect of many Orthodox believers.



Epilogue



Some Background on Ethiopia

- Ethiopia is the second oldest Christian country on earth and also possesses treasures from Muslim kingdoms.
- Legend has it that their red rock-hewn churches were carved in the 12th century, after God ordered King Lalibela to build them and dispatched a team of angels to help him.
- Far from being a dead relic, Lalibela's churches throng with local worshippers on any given day. Some read Biblical passages on parchment in Ge'ez, a 2,500 year-old language. Others press lips and foreheads to damp walls, or prostrate themselves to kiss the stone floors.



A Christian Orthodox monk leaves a rock-hewn church in Lalibela, in this September 16, 2007 file photo. (Radu Sigheti/Files/Reuters)

Ethiopia and Christianity

- The era of persecution, begun in 1633, lasted up to the twentieth century.
- The story of the missionaries' vain efforts is very simple and very heroic. An expedition arrives; penetrates into the country; scarcely is its coming recognized than its sentence is banishment or death. Yet the attempt is renewed again and again. There were many martyrdoms.



Journey of St. Justin

By 1839 Justin de Jacobis had arrived on the scene and devised for himself a very special plan of action. Clad as a monk, he professed great austerity of life; he preached to the poor, avoided discussions with the clergy, avoided the towns, endeavored to gain general sympathy, and often entered the Coptic churches to pray when no service was proceeding. He thus succeeded in making many converts.



A “Living Sermon”

Long after Justin’s death, Cardinal Massaia, who had ordained him, stated:

“To see this man, serious and pleasant at the same time, frugal in the matter of food, simple, modest and unobtrusive in his way of dressing, courteous and charitable in behavior, always ready to say a comforting word [...] to see him living a life which combined the isolation of a hermit and the zeal of an apostle, all this was, for us, a living sermon.”



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