



St. Justin de Jacobis

Conquering hearts:
the art of dialogue

A unique mission

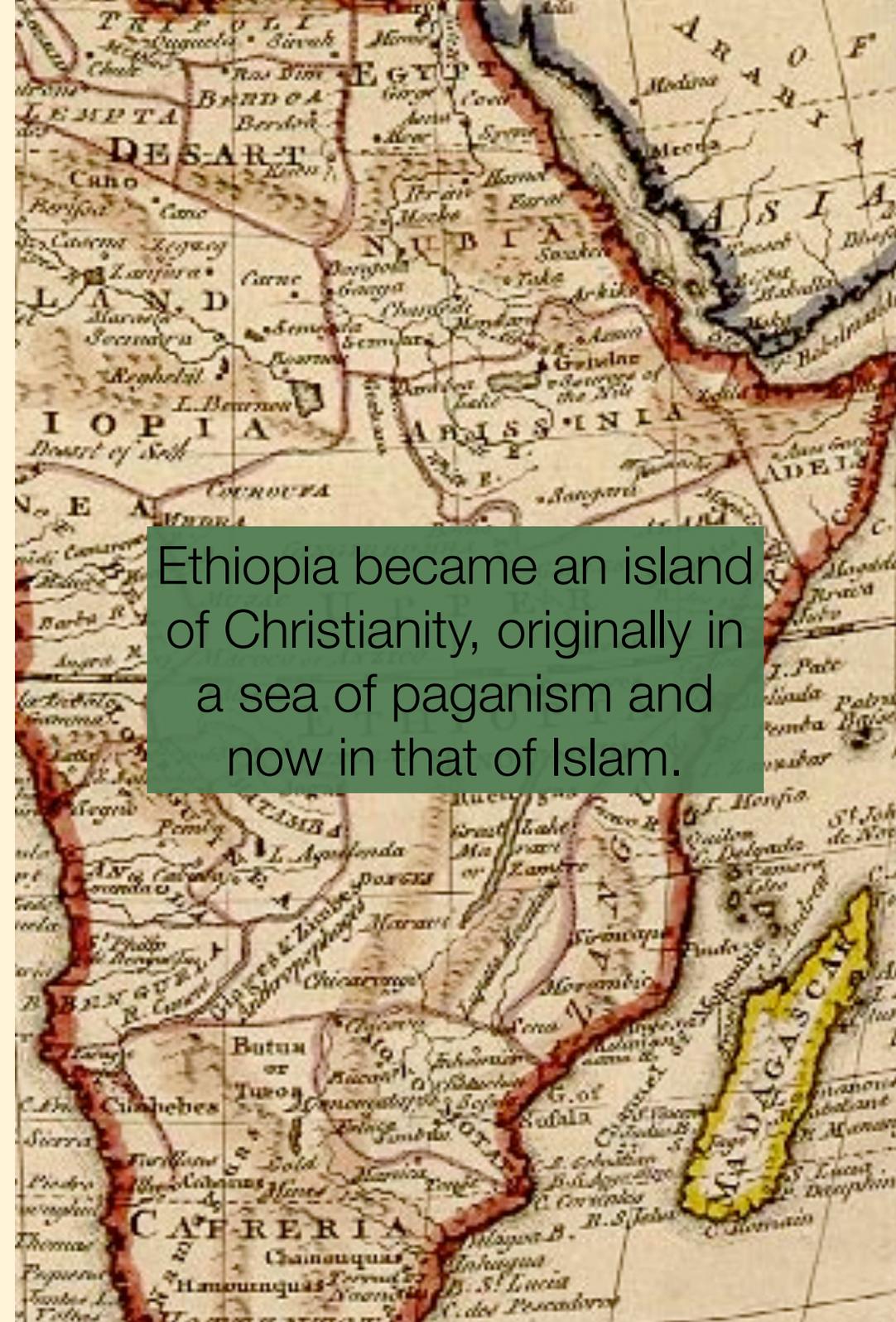
St. Justin did not head off to an African country to preach the Gospel to the pagans, but went into an already Christian country to unite the Christians of Africa with the Christians of Rome.



Different from other countries of Africa

St. Justin was dealing with a country (Ethiopia) with a history completely different from the other countries of Africa:

- It had never experienced the yoke of colonialism
- It was the continuation of the Kingdom of Aksum, which in the period of its greatest splendor (c. 325) had accepted the new religion of Christianity: for centuries, the strongest reason for Ethiopia's national unity and something that distinguishes its people, who are of the Christian-Orthodox faith, from other Africans.

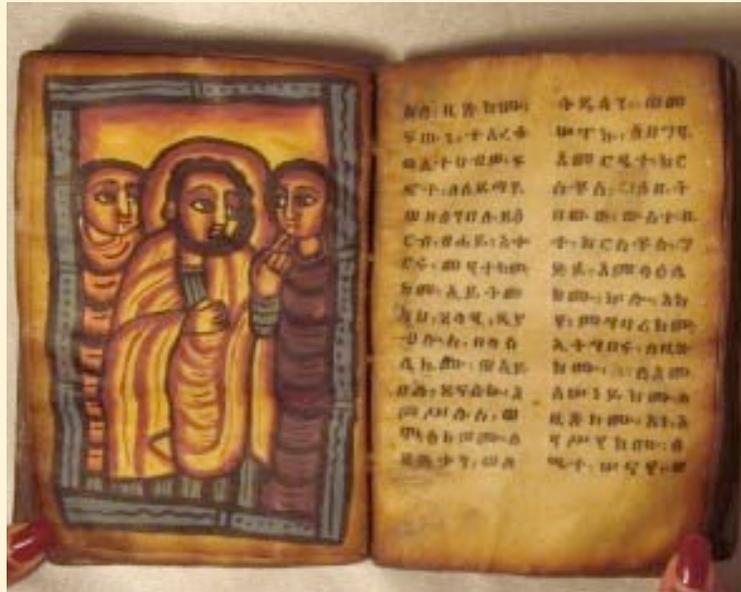


Political situation that St. Justin faced



- A war with the southern Moslem states lasted from 1333 till 1577. A bitter final campaign was won by the Christians of Ethiopia, but with the deciding influence of Portuguese soldiers.
- Portuguese and Jesuit missionaries came to Ethiopia to collect payment due for the help the Portuguese soldiers had given. This “payment” was to be the transfer of the Ethiopian people from the Christian-Orthodox faith to the Catholic faith.
- The European missionaries were expelled in 1632. After this expulsion Ethiopia began an isolation which would last for centuries. They were hostile generally against everything European, but especially against Catholics, who had tried to replace their long cultural tradition with the Latin one.
- The period known as “the era of the princes” started in the late 1800s. The *ras*, the great feudal lords of the Ethiopian regions, began to affirm their independence from the central government, which was by now a series of mere puppet emperors. That was the political situation when Justin De Jacobis arrived in Ethiopia.

Ecclesiastical situation that St. Justin faced



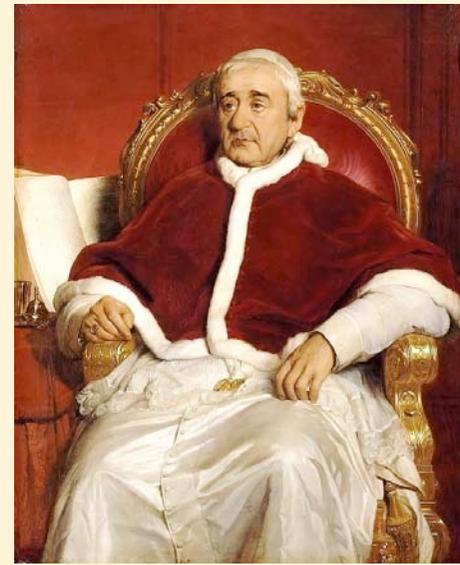
An Ethiopian Bible

- The situation in the Church was defined by theological disputes about the uncton of Christ. This question provoked many bloody encounters.
 - Ethiopia was divided into three distinct traditions or schools of theology, associated with regional monasteries.
- Until 1974 the spiritual and temporal power in Ethiopia, that is Church and State, were merged and so penetrated each other that, as a result, there was only one single moral entity. At the time of St. Justin the Emperor was forced, by the circumstances at any given moment, to proclaim the Christology taught by one of the three traditions as the official religion of his kingdom, to the clear disadvantage of the other two. Not infrequently, following the proclamation of the official doctrine of the Ethiopian State there came severe punishment, including the death penalty, against the principal exponents of the other schools of theology.

Dislike of Catholic missionaries

Catholics involved in theological dialectic had been labelled, by the Ethiopian experts of the 17th century, as “dissimulators”.

In fact, an important Ethiopian theologian of the 15th century had written “the malice of the wiles of the [Catholics] is greater than the amount of sand on the banks of the River Ghion (the Blue Nile).”



Pope Gregory XVI



Pedro Páez Jaramillo (1564 – 1622), a Spanish Jesuit missionary in Ethiopia.

What was St. Justin's secret to success?

It is a well known fact that Ethiopia has always been very hostile towards missionaries, so it is quite legitimate to ask ourselves this question: Why was it that Justin De Jacobis, an ordinary priest, had such success as to earn the title of “founder” of the Ethiopian Catholic Church of the Alexandrian Rite, while both the missionaries who were his predecessors and those who were his contemporaries failed totally?



Why other missionaries to Ethiopia failed

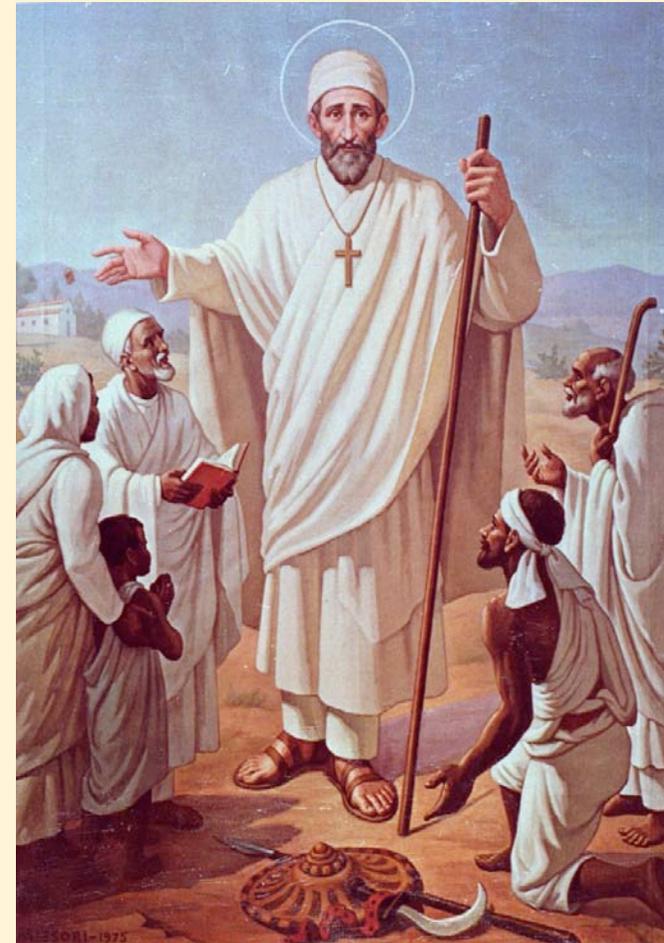
The author's personal opinion is that those others failed spectacularly-- and continue failing, even today-- because they have tried, and are still trying, to make the Ethiopian Christians convert to Catholicism by:

- not entering into dialogue, but getting involved in useless and sterile discussions, using Western methods of argument that ignore the Ethiopian theological dialectic, which is not based on rational reasoning but on repeated quoting from Scripture, each opposing the other's quotations in support of his own thesis
- replacing Christianity of the Oriental tradition, which is the Ethiopian form, with Western Christianity
- imposing the Latin Rite in place of the Ethiopian one, which is an appropriate rite for the local culture
- forbidding or disrespecting local usages and customs, by imposing Western ones

Why Justin succeeded

Justin De Jacobis, on the other hand, succeeded in achieving marvelous results because, being a man of simplicity, he understood well that:

- it was not possible to bring about unity among Christians by means of theological debate, but only by initiating religious dialogue which was frank and open, and based, first of all, on respect for the other
- he was going to have to respect Christianity of the Ethiopian (Oriental) tradition, as it was
- he was going to have to use the Ethiopian Rite
- he was going to have to follow usages and customs of the country (apart from those which, in his opinion, were clearly contrary to Gospel teaching)



St. Justin's art of dialogue

- Justin De Jacobis, in his first talk or, as the Ethiopians would say, his *manfasawi Cewewet* (spiritual dialogue), which he gave on 26 January 1840 in the Amharic language to some clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, did not say “I am here before you so that we can discuss the theological problems which divide your Church from that of Rome.”



- No, what he did say was “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.” We see, that Justin speaks of his love for the Ethiopian Christians, love which the Holy Spirit has caused to live in him. He avoids the usual theological discussions.

Things St. Justin said to the Ethiopians

- That those who were there to listen to his talk were like “his parents and friends”
- “I am a priest like yourselves; I am a confessor like yourselves”. Justin, unlike his predecessors and some of his influential contemporaries, said that he considered the Ethiopian priests equal in dignity with himself, and that for him their priesthood was valid.
- Justin once rounded off one of his talks by asking whether in the four months he had spent in Ethiopia he had ever done anything which might have caused scandal, and by promising to be their friend and servant.
- “I have come [...] to tell you that the Christians of Rome wish to join the Christians of Abyssinia, they want to love them, they want to be their brothers.” Justin does not speak of “conversion,” but rather of “union”.



The Latin Rite vs. the Ethiopian Rite

“The various oriental rites, among which is the Ethiopian, although they differ from each other and from the Latin in non-essential matters, have several parts in common which indicate the same liturgical origin: these are the offertory rites, the liturgy of the word, with the proclamation of the Creed at the centre, the Pater noster, the Preface dialogue and the Sanctus, culminating in the consecration, etc.” (The main differences were in non-essential matters.)

And: “The Ethiopian liturgy, which came to birth in times of insurmountable difficulties because of the continuous centuries-old wars in defense of the faith, respected the strong characteristics and the deeply-felt religious convictions of its people. It has remained unchanged for centuries, both in its structure and in its language, and has never been revised, even in the post-conciliar liturgical renewal. Because of this, by studying it we can discover the most authentic traditions of Christian antiquity from the first centuries.”

- *The Ordinary and Four Anaphoras of the Ethiopian Mass*, published in Rome in 1969



Ethiopian monk. Photo by Indrik Myneur

St. Justin and the Ethiopian Rite

- When Justin arrived in 1839 he began going to Ethiopian Orthodox churches to pray, to be present at functions being celebrated there, including the Eucharistic liturgy. This provoked curiosity, interest and sympathy among the Orthodox clergy.
- He would start friendly chats about the faith, and understood immediately that he did not have to teach the Ethiopians new dogmas, new morality, new liturgy, but to promote union between the Orthodox faith and the Catholic faith.
- With this aim in mind he engaged in dialogue with educated people who could follow his line of argument, and he spoke about Christian faith by starting from the Ethiopian books of Sacred Scripture, which he knew well. In that way, with the help of his new friends, he came to the conclusion that in the prayers of the Ethiopian there was nothing displeasing to the Lord. He therefore decided to allow his new disciples to continue their own devotions, even after they had accepted the Catholic faith.



Admired even by his enemies

In closing, here some comments made by those who opposed St. Justin, not because of his behavior but because of his Catholic faith:

- Emperor Teodoro II, who wanted to unify Ethiopia under one crown and one faith, the Orthodox faith, said about Justin: “If I had had Abuna Yaqob with me I would have easily achieved success.”
- Abuna Salama III, a friend of the Protestants and definitely an enemy of Justin, said: “*Yaqob, sadeq naw hatiatur ayscescegem*” (Jacobus is a good man, he does not conceal his sins”).
- Orthodox people who met him first hand, but who did not become Catholics, when speaking about Justin, said: “*Haymanotu Kefu nat engi megbarus malkam nat*” (his faith is wrong, but his life is good).
- Ahmad Ara, the leader of the Moslems who escorted the body of St. Justin De Jacobus for four days, going against the Islamic tradition of not carrying a Christian body, said: “*Yom tanasta dabra sedeq wameskayomu lanadayan walaghefuan*” (Today the mountain of truth has collapsed, the refuge of the poor and the marginalized).

To sum up, Justin
conquered the
hearts of the
Ethiopians by his
authentically
Christian behavior.



Source: [Justin de Jacobis: the Art of Dialogue](#)
by Professor Yaqob Beyené