

Contribution of the Missionaries of Africa and the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa to the Missionary Endeavour of the Universal Church

Introduction

Charles Lavigerie, who founded the Society of Missionaries of Africa in 1868 and the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa the following year, considered Algiers where he had been appointed archbishop, as the gateway to the whole of Africa.¹ Yet the first apostolate that he gave to his missionaries was to take care of the orphans left in the region of Algiers by an epidemic of cholera and the outbreak of famine. The two missionary institutes have continued to work in North Africa, particularly in Algeria and Tunisia, from this time right to the present day.

In this short paper I wish to sketch the outlines of this apostolic activity in North Africa, and then speak about the expansion into Sub-Saharan Africa. After referring briefly to the instructions Lavigerie gave to his missionaries, I shall say something about the preparation needed for the apostolate. A word will be said about a new focus towards the African world. Finally, I shall give some information on the contribution of members of the two institutes to the work of the Universal Church.

The First Apostolate

Lavigerie's initial project had been for institutes of men and women who would be "consecrated to prayer, to agricultural work, and to the care of the poor and the sick"². The model proposed was that of the monasteries in medieval times. "Lavigerie wanted to create centres which would generate human development. It amounted to a preaching of the Gospel, not by word, but through work, respect and accessibility"³. In order to carry out this work, Lavigerie exhorted his missionaries to follow the example of St Paul who made himself "all things to all men" (1 Co 9:22). In fact, as Jean-Marie Gaudeul has pointed out, Lavigerie "insisted so much on this theme that he forbade his missionaries to preach Christianity to Muslims as long as they were not so completely integrated into the Muslim society and its

¹ For what follows I am relying on François RENAULT, *Cardinal Lavigerie: Churchman, Prophet and Missionary* (transl. by John O'Donohue), London, The Athlone Press 1994.

² François RENAULT, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, p.104.

³ *Ibid.* p.108.

culture as to be totally accepted by the group as men (and women) of God and brothers (and sisters)”⁴.

The emphasis on society and culture is worth noting. Lavigerie was not so much interested in individual conversions to Christianity as in the evangelization of society as a whole. This, he felt, would lead to a situation in which individuals would be free from the pressure of their milieu and would be able to choose for themselves to be baptized as Christians and then freely live out their option. He recognized that this might take centuries and would require from the missionaries the witness of “disinterested love and service” over many generations⁵.

In North Africa, this disinterested love and service took many different forms. There were first of all the orphanages, for boys and girls. Then came educational establishments, for primary and secondary education, as also technical institutes. Mgr Georges Mercier, bishop of Laghouat in the Sahara of Algeria in the period before independence, founded a whole network of centres for professional formation. In Tunisia, the former Missionaries of Africa seminary in the rural area of Thibar was transformed into an agricultural school. Not to be forgotten are the dispensaries, for the care of the sick, which were much appreciated. Very popular too were the libraries which were founded and which acted at the same time as cultural centres. Special mention should be made here of the library of the Institut de Belles Lettres Arabes (IBLA) in Tunis which has served generations of students and professors, as also “La Ruche” (the beehive) in Algiers, which developed into a sort of club frequented by many young girls.

Expansion into Sub-Saharan Africa

As has been mentioned, Lavigerie saw Algeria as the gateway to the Continent of Africa. He was an avid reader of reports sent by explorers or missionaries. Since it was the Protestant missionaries who were entering into the heart of Africa, he felt that it was high time that Catholics emulated them and, if possible, got in before them. It is interesting to note that in the instructions that Lavigerie gave to the missionaries he was sending to East Africa, he told them to avoid establishing themselves in the vicinity of Protestants. He rightly held that conflict among Christians would be a counter-witness to the Gospel.

⁴ Jean-Marie GAUDEUL, *Encounters and Clashes*, Rome, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica 2000, Vol.1 p.310.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp.314-315.

The Missionaries of Africa were already active in the Sahara, but Lavigerie wanted to push farther into West Africa. A first caravan was sent across the Sahara, but the three missionaries were killed by their guides in January 1876. Five years later, a second attempt was made by the same route, but with a similar result. Eventually the missionaries, both men and women, were sent by sea to the coast of West Africa, and then made their way into the interior. They set up missions in what are now the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana, where they still remain. They are now present also in the following countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. At times they have been active in Chad and Senegal. For the Missionaries of Africa, Mauritania is also attached to the West African Province.

In 1878, ten years after the foundation of the Society, the first missionaries left for East Africa. After penetrating the interior, the first group divided into two, some going to Uganda, others proceeding to the Western part of present-day Tanzania. Today the Province of East Africa includes, besides these two countries, Kenya – where the Missionary Sisters of O.L. of Africa preceded the men – Sudan, and a presence in S. Sudan.

To be complete it should be mentioned that the two Missionary Institutes went further into the interior of Africa, into Rwanda, Burundi and what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. They also went further south, into Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and, later, South Africa.

It is only right to mention that in 1878, the same year that the first caravan left for Equatorial Africa, Lavigerie sent a group of missionaries to Jerusalem. The immediate task was to look after the Church of Saint Anne and the excavations of the Probatic Pool. Yet Lavigerie's project included the founding of a seminary for the formation of Greek Catholic (Melkite) priests. This seminary functioned until 1967 when the result of the Six Days War meant that Arab students could no longer come to Jerusalem. Consequently, the seminary was moved to Lebanon. The Missionaries of Africa have remained in Jerusalem, however, and now offer refresher courses in the Bible, mainly for African priests and religious.

In the early 1960s, the visit to Jerusalem of an Ethiopian bishop led to an invitation to the Pères Blancs (White Fathers - it is as such that we are known in Jerusalem)

to set up a similar seminary for priests of the Ethiopian Catholic rite. The White Fathers are still in Ethiopia, where their work has expanded beyond the seminary, with a special emphasis on youth work and contact with university students.

Instructions for missionary work

To his missionaries Lavigerie gave detailed instructions covering not only the religious spirit that must guide them, but also the need to adapt to local circumstances as far as possible with regard to food, lodging and clothing. He made it obligatory to study and speak the languages of the people amongst whom they would be living. He told his missionaries to be patient and not to be in a hurry to baptize. He insisted on a thorough preparation for baptism, imposing the ancient discipline of the catechumenate. Realising that he was entrusting to his missionaries a difficult mission, he warned them against discouragement.

Lavigerie's purpose in sending out his missionaries was to found and build up the Church in Africa, but he impressed upon them that their role was to act as pioneers, realising that the permanent evangelisation of Africa would be accomplished by the Africans themselves. He therefore encouraged them from the very beginning to look among the first converts for people able to assist them in their work, as catechists, medical assistants and even as clergy.

Missionary work consisted not only of preaching, but also of education and medical work. This meant founding schools, hospitals and dispensaries. Yet, as soon as possible, the missionaries handed over these institutions to congregations of men and women specialised in educational and/or medical work. Seminaries were founded - the first being set up in Uganda in 1893. These seminaries were staffed by missionaries until they could be handed over to the Local Churches. Similarly, the MSOLA engaged in the formation of African women religious. In fact, they have assisted in the foundation of over 20 African religious congregations.

Preparation for the Apostolate

Lavigerie's orientations for the apostolate among Muslims were coordinated and translated into practical directives by Henri Marchal who was a member of the

General Council of the Missionaries of Africa from 1912-1947. Lavigerie put great weight on the need to speak the language of the people. Marchal realized that the initiation into the different languages of North Africa, local Arabic, classical Arabic and Berber, needed to be organized. This led to the foundation, in 1926, of IBLA, already mentioned. In the beginning, the teaching institute and the cultural centre were combined, but in 1949 the formation centre became an autonomous institute at La Manouba, a suburb of Tunis. Limited in the first years to Missionaries of Africa, the intake of students soon widened to diocesan priests and members of other religious institutes, both male and female. There was also a change in the programme. At first both classical Arabic and the local dialect were taught, then, since not all the students were destined to remain in Tunisia, or even in North Africa, the teaching of the dialect was dropped. This led the MSOLA to open a separate centre for initiation into Tunisian Arabic and culture.

In 1964, after government expropriation of the house at La Manouba, the institute was transferred to Rome where it became the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI). This move widened the perspectives of the institute from Africa to the whole world, giving it the role of preparing those destined to work in the sphere of Christian-Muslim relations in whatever part of the world that might be. The Society of Missionaries of Africa has continued to supply staff for the PISAI – the current Director of the Institute is a member of the Society. Special mention should be made of Sister Bernadette Clergues MSOLA, a member of the staff 1980-1985⁶.

It should be added that in Algeria, in the region of Kabylia where the people speak their own language, Kabyle or Berber, the Missionaries of Africa set up the Centre for Berber Studies, for the study and teaching of the language. The MSOLA also collaborated in these efforts, and some of them became real experts in the language.

The need to learn the language of the people amongst whom the missionaries are to exercise their apostolate, and to become familiar with their culture, was not confined to North Africa. It was an important concern for Lavigerie. In his

⁶ For further details on the origins and functioning of PISAI see *Le PISAI: cinquante ans au service du dialogue*, Rome, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d' Islamistica 2000, especially pp. 1-29.

instructions to the members of the first caravan to depart for Equatorial Africa he stated clearly:

Knowledge of the native tongue is indispensable for preaching; it is therefore necessary that the missionaries should learn it as well and as quickly as possible⁷.

If the language did not yet exist in written form, Lavigerie required his missionaries to compose a dictionary and also a grammar.⁸

To the African World

Our two Institutes were founded for Africa and most of our active members are still working in Africa, in over twenty countries. In recent years, however, the focus has been widened to “the African world” which goes far beyond the boundaries of the African Continent. Lavigerie, who had made an exception for a foundation in Jerusalem, would, I am sure, approve of this new horizon.

This new definition of our missionary task has led us to take over parishes in Marseilles and Toulouse, France; in Sao Salvador da Bahia, Brazil; in Liverpool, England, and in Brooklyn, USA. It has brought about the setting-up of Africa Centres in Berlin and in Montreal. It has included lobbying, together with the members of other religious institutes, for justice and peace for Africans through the African Faith and Justice Network, with its headquarters in Washington D.C., and its European counterpart, the AEFJN, working from Brussels. Attention is also given to refugees and asylum seekers, and the MSOLA have been particularly active in the struggle to eliminate human trafficking.

Contributions to the Universal Church

Let me now turn to the contribution that the two missionary institutes have made to the universal Church. It seems appropriate to start with the Second Vatican Council, the first Council in the history of the Church that has dealt with the question of the relations of the Church to the followers of other religions. Over 40 bishops belonging to the Society of Missionaries of Africa took part in the Council, and the Superior General, Fr Leo Volker, was appointed as a member from the second session onwards. This is not the place to go into detail with regard to the contributions of these missionaries to the work of the Council, but it can be

⁷ Lavigerie, Charles, *Instructions aux Missionnaires*, Namur, Editions Grands Lacs 1950, p.70.

⁸ On this aspect of missionary endeavour see Ivan PAGE, M. Afr. *Learn the language to spread the Word: the linguistic work of the Missionaries of Africa*, Rome, Society of Missionaries of Africa, Historical Series no. 7, 2007 (this publication exists also in French).

mentioned that they had considerable influence in the drafting and approval of *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on the Church's missionary activity. It is also worth noting that Fr Robert Caspar, a professor at the Manouba who, at the time of the Council, was in Rome preparing a doctorate in theology, was invited as an expert to help in the drafting of the paragraph on Islam in the Declaration on the relations of the Church to non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*.

Even before the opening of the Second Vatican Council the services of a Missionary of Africa had been required by the Vatican. In 1961 Father Joseph Cuoq was appointed to the Congregation for Oriental Churches in order to monitor the question of relations with Muslims. When Pope Paul VI set up the Secretariat for Non-Christians (SNC) in 1964, Fr Cuoq was transferred to this new body. He continued working there, at the Islam desk, for a further 10 years. He it was who started the tradition, which is still followed today, of sending a message of greetings to Muslims for the end of the month of Ramadan. Much later I myself was appointed to work in this office (which in 1998 had its name changed to Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue [PCID]), not at the Islam desk, but as Secretary (1987-2002) and then President (2002-2006).

Mention must be made of Mgr Pierre Duprey. Professor at St Anne's in Jerusalem, he was brought to Rome at the time of Vatican II in order to look after the Orthodox invited to the Council as Observers. After the Council, Fr Duprey was kept in Rome on the staff of the Secretariat for Christian Unity (later to become the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity). He rose steadily, becoming first the head of the Oriental Section, then Under-Secretary, and finally Secretary.

Another confrere, Fr Robrecht Watteyne, worked for many years as a *minutante* in the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. There were various confreres appointed at different times Consultors to this dicastery. I do not have the details. Another confrere, Fr Gérard Tronche, was for a time in charge of the desk of the Apostolate of the Sea within the Council for Migrants and People on the Move.

Members of both missionary institutes have been engaged at different times as Consultors of the SNC/PCID. In the first list of Consultors, published in the *Annuario Pontificio* of 1966, three Missionaries of Africa appear already: Robert

Caspar, Gilles de Rasily and Leo Volker. Here are the names of all those appointed at different times, given in alphabetical order: Maurice Borrmans, Robert Caspar, Michael Fitzgerald, Joseph Gelot, Jacques Lanfry, Michel Lelong, Gilles de Rasily, Carmen Sammut, Leo Volker. 1974 saw the creation, within the SNC, of the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims, a small body which acts as a think-tank for the PCID. This commission has its own group of Consultors. Here are the names of those who have contributed to its work in this capacity: Robert Caspar, Jean-Marie Gaudeul, Michel Lagarde, Richard Nyombi, Lucie Pruvost.

It is not only the Holy See, however, that has been engaged in interreligious dialogue, and that has set up offices for this purpose. Local Churches have also been active in this field. In France, already in 1971, the hierarchy established the Secretariat for Relations with Islam, now named the National Service for Relations with Muslims (SNRM). The following were called to work in this service (in alphabetical not chronological order): Marie-Josée Dor, Jean-Marie Gaudeul, Michel Lelong, Jeanne Pernin. A few years later, in 1978, two centres were created, one in Frankfurt, Germany and the other in Brussels, Belgium. The Christlich-islamische Begegnungs und Dokumentationstelle (CIBEDO) in Frankfurt was set up by the Missionaries of Africa and later transferred to the Episcopal Conference of Germany. Hans Vöcking and Werner Wanzura have both worked full-time in this office. In Belgium, it was the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussel that took the initiative to found a Centre for relations with Muslims. This was given the name El-Kalima (the Word). In this centre the following Missionaries of Africa have at times been working: Charles Dekkers (one of the four M. Afr. assassinated in Tizi-Ouzou, Algeria, in 1994), Jean-Marie Gérard and Roger Luyten.

Other Missionaries of Africa and Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa have worked at the local level in Africa, in diocesan, national or regional secretariats for relations with Muslims and the followers of Traditional Religion. It is not possible to mention their names, but they all deserved to be remembered.

Conclusion

In this communication I have tried to give an idea of the different ways in which the members of the Society of Missionaries of Africa and of the Congregation of

the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa have contributed to the mission of the Church. The survey is obviously by no means complete. As may have been grasped from the beginning of this paper, the encounter with Muslims forms part of the charism that our founder, Cardinal Lavigerie, gave to his two missionary institutes. We could say that this charism is lived out wherever our communities are to be found. It could be added that the spirit which Lavigerie tried to inculcate in his missionaries, both men and women, is not limited to encounter with Muslims but extends to relations with all, whether they be Catholics or Christians of other denominations, Muslims or people belonging to other religions, followers of Traditional Religion, or even non-believers. The encounter may aim simply at helping people to live in peace and harmony as good neighbours. It can take the form of working together to promote justice and peace. It may consist in encouraging people to come together to pray in times of joy (birth of children, baptism or circumcision, weddings, feast day celebrations) or in times of sadness (sickness, death, funerals, disasters) In all circumstances it will mean for Christians reaching out to others with respect, a respect based on the love of God for all human beings. It is to be hoped that the Missionaries of Africa and the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, wherever they are, will continue to live out their charism and will continue to be of service to the African world.