

COMMUNICATIONES

ANDRÉ SAMPERS

THE FIRST OFFER OF A REDEMPTORIST MISSION IN AFRICA, 1854

SUMMARIUM

Circa an. 1730 s. Alfonsus semel iterumque secum agitavit, an forsitan a Deo ad evangelisandos infideles esset vocatus; quod dubium ab ipsius conscientiae moderatore sensu negativo solutum est. Varii inter Sancti sodales in Congregatione SS.mi Redemptoris eundi ad missiones externas paratos se declaraverunt; paucitate tamen operariorum aliisque rebus adversis eorum desiderium ad effectum perduci nequivit.

Anno centesimo a Congregationis fundatione Redemptoristae laborem apostolicum extra Europam assumpserunt, et quidem in Statibus Foederatis Americae; sed potius inter advenas, quamquam initio etiam indigenis evangelium nuntiaverunt. An. 1854 S. Sedes primum Congregationi proposuit missionem assumendam inter non-christianos, et quidem in territorio ad oram occidentalem Africae sito, quod dicebatur Guinea-Senegambia, tunc temporis sub dominatione franco-gallica. Non cognoscimus responsum datum; pro certo tamen scimus an. 1899 tantum Redemptoristas missionem in Africa suscepisse.

One of the most striking characteristics of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, during his entire career as priest-religious-bishop, was undoubtedly his zeal to win souls for Christ: not for nothing has he been dubbed « Most Zealous Doctor ». His ambition embraced the entire world and the whole of mankind; he tried to win some by preaching, others through writing, and those he could not reach by the spoken or printed word — not less effectively — by his constant prayers. In this last group the people of the so-called mission countries had a privileged place. So it is by no means surprising that for some time, around 1730, he harboured thoughts of devoting himself to the conversion of non-Christians. Eventually, however, his

spiritual director made it clear to him that it was God's will that he dedicate himself to apostolic work among the people of his own country¹.

Alphonsus' early followers in the Congregation of the Redemptorists, founded in 1732, were animated by the same spirit as their Father. Most significant is the special vow, inserted in the oldest Rules and Constitutions² and in the profession form of 1743³, to go, on the Pope's or the Superior General's order, to the foreign missions. At the request of the archbishop of Naples, who wanted the members of the new Institute for work in their homeland, this vow was left out of the definitive Constitutions and Rules approved by Benedict XIV in 1749⁴. But even after that, on several occasions members volunteered to labor among the non-Christians. However, pressure of work in the Kingdom of Naples, lack of personnel and other adverse circumstances made the realisation of this ideal impossible⁵.

Only in 1832, i.e. a hundred years after its foundation, the Congregation began to work outside Europe, namely in the United States of America. About 10-25 years later there followed several calls from bishops for Brazil and Argentina; but these requests — urgent as they were — could not be complied with⁶. However, the work the

¹ All biographies of Alphonsus mention his keen interest in the foreign missions; more amply in R. TELLERIA, *S. Alfonso M. de Liguorio*, Madrid 1950-1951, 2 vols; see the index (v. II, p. 1015) s.v. Misiones de infieles. There are several good studies on the subject: J. van der HELDEN, *Wat de H. Alfonsus deed voor de vreemde missiën*, in *Het Missiewerk* 3 (1921-22) 23-27; J. NIELEN, *Der hl. Alfons v. L. und die auswärtigen Missionen*, in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 16 (1926) 25-38; J. DREHMANN, *De H. Alfonsus en de vreemde missies*, in *Het Missiewerk* 14 (1932-33) 96-104; R. TELLERIA, *De S. Alfonso et de missionibus inter infideles adnotatiunculae*, in *Analecta CSSR* 20 (1948) 133-136; O. GREGORIO, *S. Alfonso e le missioni estere*, in *S. Alfonso* (Pagani) 23 (1952) 167-170; *Id.*, *L'ideale missionario del Giappone*, *ibid.* 29 (1958) 75-77. There is also a draft of a study by J. CUVELIER, *St. Alphonse et les missions étrangères*, drawn up by the author about ten years before his death (1962) in which he states: « Il y a quelques articles. Mais le sujet mérite une étude spéciale, plus étendue, plus approfondie ».

² These texts have been edited in *Spic. hist.* 16 (1968) 293 ff.

³ The profession form of 1743 is edited in *Analecta CSSR* 1 (1922) 47-48, facsimile on pp. 44-45.

⁴ Cardinal G. Spinelli's 'votum' for the Roman authorities on the Rules submitted by Alphonsus for papal approval, dated from Naples, October 11, 1748 is edited in the *Documenta miscellanea ad regulam et spiritum Congregationis nostrae illustrandum*, Romae 1904, 75-78. This document is of great importance in the early history of the Institute.

⁵ Several details on the mission-spirit of Alphonsus' companions are given in the publications quoted in note 1. There is no specific study on the Congregation and the foreign missions.

⁶ On the first calls to South America (1843-1857) see a study in this review 21 (1973) 9-27. In 1843 the Redemptorist Francisco de Menezes, born 1806 at Goa,

fathers were called for in these countries was mainly to preserve and revive the faith of the Catholics, the native population and, especially, the immigrants; therefore, it cannot be called foreign mission work in the traditional sense of the word.

The very first time the Redemptorists were asked to extend their work explicitly to the conversion of non-Christians was in 1854 when the Congregation of Propaganda inquired if they felt able to assume responsibility for a new vicariate apostolic, should the vicariate of the Two Guineas, to which the mission of Senegambia at the time belonged, be divided. This territory was at that time for the most part under French rule.

So far we have only the original letter, written May 16, 1854 by the Secretary of Propaganda, Archbishop Alessandro Barnabò, to the Redemptorist Procurator General, Fr. Domenico Centore, which is given below. In the General Archives of the Redemptorists in Rome (hereinafter: AGR) we did not find any further documentation. They are, unfortunately, rather incomplete for the period 1853-55 as a result of the troubles the Congregation endured in these years. Strangely enough no reply to Barnabò's request was found in the Propaganda Fide Archives⁷ (hereinafter: APF).

In any case, we know with certainty that the Redemptorists did not evangelize in Africa until 1899 in which year the Belgian Province of the Congregation founded a mission station (March 1st) at Matadi in the then Belgian Congo⁸.

was sent by Propaganda as an apostolic missionary to Bombay. He spent the rest of his life working in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and in India, mainly in Bombay where he died in 1863, « fidelis vocationi suae ». Biographical sketch of Menezes in *Spic. hist.* 23 (1975) 200-220. We may mention here that since then we have obtained further documentation on Menezes, partly from the Propaganda Fide Archives, partly from archives in India and in Sri Lanka through our confrere Fr. Francis da Costa. At the conclusion of the somewhat laborious research, this review will publish a supplement to the above-mentioned article.

⁷ No documentation on the Propaganda proposal to the Redemptorists was found in APF, *Scritture riferite nei Congressi, Africa, Angola, Congo, Senegal*, vol. 7 (1841-1860). There are a number of documents concerning the intended division of the vicariate apostolic of the Two Guineas; the lack of personnel and the need for missionaries from other Congregations are stressed.

⁸ For the beginnings of the Redemptorist mission in the Belgian Congo, see the excellent study of M. KRATZ, *La mission des Rédemptoristes belges au Bas-Congo. La période des semailles, 1899-1920* (Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Classe des Sciences morales et politiques, NS XXXVIII 3), Bruxelles 1970. Abbreviated edition in German: *Id., Die Kongomission der belgischen Redemptoristen in den Jahren 1899-1920*, Siegburg 1969; reviewed *ante* 17 (1969) 420-421. A survey of the documentation on the Redemptorist work in Africa, kept in AGR, is inserted in the *Guida delle fonti per la storia dell'Africa a sud del Sahara negli archivi della S. Sede e negli archivi ecclesiastici d'Italia*, to be published shortly by the Vatican Archives.

DOCUMENT

Alessandro Barnabò, Secretary of Propaganda, to Fr. Domenico Centore, Procurator General of the Redemptorists; Rome, May 16, 1854. - Original in AGR XLI B 6⁹.

Dalla Propaganda, 16 Maggio 1854

Nel 1842 Gregorio XVI di s. m. eresse in vicariato apostolico le Due Guinee, regioni vastissime all'occidente dell'Africa, e ad esse pochi anni indietro fu unito sotto un medesimo vicario apostolico l'altro ben esteso paese che appellasi Senegambia¹⁰. La missione pertanto delle Due Guinee e della Senegambia comprende una lunghezza di 1500 leghe e per 5 in 6 cento leghe si dilata all'interno, con una popolazione che ascende approssimativamente a 50 milioni. Tanta moltitudine d'uomini, se si eccettuino 12 in 15 mila cattolici, è immersa intieramente nelle tenebre del paganesimo, dell'islamismo e del protestantesimo.

Ora una missione sì estesa e in cui la messe è sì grande, non può più a lungo formare un solo vicariato, né rimanere affidata alla sola Congregazione dello Spirito Santo e del S. Cuor di Maria¹¹, al cui zelo e sagrifizj si dee la conservazione del vicariato anzidetto. Quindi presso formale domanda del vicario apostolico delle Guinee e del superiore generale della lodata Congregazione¹² la Propaganda ha adottato il principio di suddividere quella missione in diversi vicariati, rimettendone peraltro la esecuzione al tempo in cui si avranno in pronto gli elementi necessarj ad effettuare la decretata divisione.

Ora richiedendosi all'uopo principalmente operarj evangelici, che animati da spirito apostolico vogliono recare il nome e la fede di Gesù Cristo fra gli Africani, tanto più degni della sollecitudine della Chiesa quanto più

⁹ Copy in APF, LDB, vol. 345 (1854), fo 538r-539v. The copybook indicates to whom the letter was sent: « Circolare diretta ai RR. PP. Preposito Generale della Compagnia di Gesù — dei Passionisti — dei Cappuccini — dei Francescani — dei Benedettini — dei Lazzaristi — [dei] Missionari del Preziosissimo Sangue — dei Liguorini ecc. ». So the request was forwarded to several Orders and Congregations, not to the Redemptorists only.

¹⁰ The vicariate apostolic of the Two Guineas was erected on October 3, 1842 and the same day Edward Barron (1801-1854), former vicar general of the diocese of Philadelphia, Pa., who since 1841 was engaged in missionary work in West Africa, was appointed vicar apostolic and bishop of Constantina i.p.i. He resigned his vicariate in 1844. In 1842 the recently founded Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary had sent its first missionaries to the vicariate and one of them, Jean Benoît Truffet (1812-1847), became in 1846 vicar apostolic and bishop of Gallipoli i.p.i. Senegambia became a distinct vicariate in 1863 with Louis Kobès (1820-1872), bishop of Methone i.p.i., as its first vicar apostolic. See R. RITZLER-P. SEFRIN, *Hierarchia catholica medii et recentioris aevi*, vol. VII (1800-1846), Padova 1968, 161 and 189 (Barron); vol. VIII (1846-1903), Padova 1978, 173 (Truffet) and 382 (Kobès).

¹¹ The Congregation of the Holy Ghost was founded in 1703 in Paris by Claude François Poullart des Places; the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary was founded in 1841 in Strasbourg by the ven. François Libermann. The two Congregations merged in 1848 under the title: Congregation of the Holy Ghost under the Protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

¹² In 1854 Bp. Jean Rémi Bessieux was vicar apostolic of the Two Guineas. Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was Fr. Ignace Schwinden-

lontani¹³ dalla verità, il sottoscritto Segretario di Propaganda, in nome di questa S. Congregazione, invita V. P. R.ma a considerare, se la religiosa società cui Ella appartiene¹⁴, sarebbe in grado di accettare uno dei nuovi divisati vicariati apostolici, e se in questo caso potrebbe offrire un numero sufficiente di idonei sacerdoti ai quali affidarne la cura.

In attenzione di analogo riscontro lo scrivente con sincera stima si conferma

Dev.mo obb.mo Servitore
Al. Barnabò

R.mo P. Domenico Centore
Procuratore Gen.le dei Liguorini

hammer whose brother Edouard was a Redemptorist. (Fr. Edouard Schw. was in Rome during the years 1855-1862 as secretary of the Superior General Fr. Nicolas Mauron CSSR).

¹³ In the copy « più sono lontani ».

¹⁴ In the copy « cui Ella presiede ».