

AN ETHIOPIAN REFLECTION

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A Vincentian or Daughter of Charity cannot hear the name “Ethiopia” without thinking of St Justin De Jacobis and Blessed Ghebre Michael, both Vincentians who gave their lives for the people under their care in a country torn apart at the time by constant wars and strife.

During my seminary training and later I read the lives of these heroic saints and followed media releases on the terrible droughts in Ethiopia causing the loss of millions of people over the last ten to twenty years. From our Daughters of Charity working in Ethiopia (e.g. Srs Bridget Harley and Mave O’Brien) worked there many years) I had followed the progress of our wonderful missionaries.

Then, two years ago, Fr Abraha Girmay, a Vincentian from Ethiopia, visited us in Malvern for a week. I took him for drives around Melbourne and as we became friends he talked about his family who lived in a small village on a high mountain overlooking Alitena, the town in which St Justin de Jacobis had taken refuge from his enemies. Girmay’s determination to go to school (in Adigrat) and eventually become a priest, why he chose the Vincentian community and how he survived during the Communist regime in his country impressed me. Though moved by his story, I let it slip from my mind until my teaching responsibilities at Catholic Theological College, Melbourne, concluded. It was then that I took the opportunity to visit Ethiopia.

In the meantime Girmay and I were corresponding on “the net”. He mentioned the need of a Scripture lecturer at the Catholic seminary complex (in the Capuchin ‘compound’) for the following year and would I come? I would be teaching for three months and would stay at the Diocesan Seminary (of which he is the Rector) in Addis. The decision on my part was not difficult and the Province kindly agreed to

pay the air fare, so on Tuesday, 28th January, 2003, I flew out via Johannesburg to Addis Ababa.

Arrival in Addis

The circumstances of my arrival in Addis Abeba were not auspicious. It was a cool dark morning when the South African Airways' plane touched down at 6 a.m. Since builders were still putting the finishing touches on the new International Airport we passengers were processed so quickly that I found myself walking towards the exit within a few minutes of landing. The only problem was that there appeared to be no one to meet me! It was only after several vain attempts to phone the Seminary where I was to stay that a man came up and said "There's someone waving at you" . I looked over to the glass front of the airport and saw Girmay! He was a welcome sight. He had not been able to find the entrance due to the building not being completed.

Once my bags were in the car, we drove for 20 minutes in the quiet morning streets of Addis to the Diocesan Seminary. My new home stands inside what is called, the "Cathedral Compound", just a few hundred metres from Churchill Road, the main link with the southern section of the city where most of the commercial and government buildings are found. After breakfast, and I was shown to my room on the 2nd floor to rest for a few hours. How relieved I was to arrive safely and relax in my own room!

Later, after meeting the other Vincentian on the Seminary Staff, Fr Tadele, and the students I had my first meal. Girmay and Tadele were very mindful of the change of diet and continually during my stay with them for the next three months they took good care of me.

Teaching Program in Ethiopia

My first concern was to check the lecture program for my three months stay. Girmay took me out some 8 km from the Seminary by a road invariably busy since it was the main eastern highway from the city (leading to Eritrea). The Rector, a Capuchin (the Theological Institute is within the Capuchin compound), a gracious man, welcomed me and informed me that I would be lecturing the theologians on the Prophet Isaiah (Chaps 40-55 in particular) and Acts of the Apostles, while the philosophers would hear my lectures on the Book of Psalms. The fact that I had prepared other texts (e.g. my friend Jeremiah) was considered but politely put aside! That meant I spent more time in preparing my lectures than I had planned but at least it kept me out of mischief!

In all I taught 90 students, ranging from 2nd Year Philosophers to 4th Year Theologians. This gave me the opportunity to meet at first hand a broad range of Ethiopians preparing for the Catholic Priesthood in the various communities (e.g. Diocesans, Capuchins, Cistercians, Vincentians). Their response was pleasing, their attitude friendly and welcoming.

Three times weekly I went to lectures with the students in the Seminary bus, leaving soon after Mass and breakfast and returning for lunch. The traffic was horrendous! At first I would close my eyes at the near misses of other cars, buses, trucks, sheep, donkeys and innumerable people of every age and costume that strayed across the road or simply used it as a footpath. I remember voicing my frustration to Girmay who simply commented: “You see, Rom, these people regard the road as their own and the occupants of cars as an intrusion on their space”! After that I calmed down and noticed that no person, donkey, sheep or whatever who used the road was at all perturbed by the motorised vehicles who careered along it.

So began my three months lecture period in Ethiopia!

A Visit to the South-West

For the next three months there was little time for touring. However just before classes began I joined Girmay and two parish representatives going to a meeting in the south-west of the country. We left by the main south road to Debre Zeit and then further down to Mojo where the “Rift Lakes” begin. That meant a turn to the south west to run along a fine, straight road past Lakes Koka and Ziway and between a further two lakes (Abijatta and Langano). These are all freshwater lakes with a marvellous bird life and plenty of fish. It was quite an experience running along the Rift Valley, that incredible geological phenomenon which includes the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aqaba, the Dead Sea and Lake of Galilee. We reached our destination, Walaita (on the maps the town is called Sodo & the district Walaita), after the five hour journey (approx. 400 km). The scenery along the way was quite diverse although the drought has affected much of the southern area of the country. However, Walaita itself is set in magnificent surrounds of high mountains (a common feature of Ethiopia!). The Daughters of Charity made us very welcome, reminding us that Sr Brigid Harley (an Australian) established the mission here as well as introduced the Montessori method of teaching which the Sisters have found works well with young Ethiopians. On our return Girmay and I had to settle down to work! The semester’s teaching was upon us.

The Grand Tour!

As soon as the exams and corrections were completed, Girmay and I began our ‘tour’ of some of the most important historical & religious sites of ancient Ethiopia. We decided to take a series of air flights as the most practical mode of travel in our circumstances. We are grateful to the Ethiopian Airways’ ‘Friendships’ which carried us safely around the country.

First Stop, Baradah (Bahar Dar).

It was appropriate to begin our tour of important religious and historical sites of Ethiopia by flying from Addis to **Baradah** (Barah Dar = “border of the sea”) on the 18th April. Why? This town lies on the southern shore of Lake Tana, source of the ‘Blue’ Nile which joins the White Nile at Khartoum to form the one river stretching for thousands of kilometres into Egypt to reach eventually the Mediterranean Sea. A second reason for stopping here was to be introduced to the monastic life of Ethiopia which boasts a long and significant history in this country.

The two Daughters of Charity who run a school in the town met us at the airport and kindly invited us to stay in their house. Early next morning they drove us down to the lake where we boarded a small (and fragile looking!) skiff at 10.30 a.m. to cross to **Kibran Gebriel**, a famous **monastery** secluded on one of the lake’s many islands. Arriving there we climbed some rickety stairs to the monastery. Soon our ‘captain’ and guide led us past the monastery church to a small heavily locked and very old building built in 1624 (the monastery church dates back to 1313). Here a senior monk met us and invited us into a tiny room crowded with manuscripts, books and crosses. He spoke very good English, showed us many very ancient manuscripts (of which there are 174), icons and crosses. When Girmay told him I taught the Old Testament, he brought out and opened for me a very special MSS of the prophets, even though a few moments before he had told us it was too valuable to open for visitors! According to the story given us by our guide, this monk had been a judge but after suffering a terrible car accident vowed to God that if he was healed he would join a monastery.

Gonder, the Wondrous City

Our plane left on time (10 am) for the short trip (30 min.) up the lake to Gonder, one of Ethiopia’s largest cities. It lies among the foothills of

the **Simien Mountains**, whose peaks are 4000 metres, the 4th highest in Africa.

. On arrival we went first to the Daughters of St Anne who run a home for the blind, newly built on a hill overlooking a wide sweeping valley with magnificent mountains as a glorious back-drop. After cool drinks (it was a hot day), coffee and biscuits, we took a (mini-)bus into town (the airport is 15 km away). It was $\frac{3}{4}$ full when we stepped in but they managed to get us and our two fairly large bags on. Plenty of giggles from the ladies as they watched the ‘whitey’ (the impression I got was that was the first time they had seen one!) but then more people climbed on till we must have had about 14 in it!

Eventually we arrived in the town which is built on a series of hills, surrounded by mountains. It had been the capital of Ethiopia for 250 years. (Briggs, Guide to Ethiopia, p.277). It was founded in 1635 by Emperor **Fasil** (Fasilidas), after a “terrible century” during which the Christian Empire collapsed under Muslim Leader **Ahmed Gragn** (Briggs, p.279) and divisions when **Emperor Susneyos** (convert to Catholicism 1622) came under the influence of the Portuguese who aimed to close the Orthodox Church!. This started a war in which thousands were killed, all to no purpose since a decade later the throne went to Susneyos’ son, **Fasil**, who expelled the Portuguese and restored the Orthodox church – as well as making Gondar the capital!

The Vincentian Connection

For Vincentians and Daughters of Charity it is important to relate St Justin with Gonder. What was happening at Gonder in the mid-C19 was of great interest to Justin, since “his vicariate lay in the north of Ethiopia “ as was Gonder. Indeed he had written to Rome for advice on the Gonder situation (1857) but received no reply!.(O’Mahoney, The Ebullient Phoenix, p.97).

At the time Ethiopia was divided among two tribal leaders (or war lords): “**Tewodros** ruling over the regions of Amhara (centred in Gonder) and Shewa, while **Neguse** ruled over Tigray and Semien” (O’Mahoney p.95). France supported both leaders in the north of the country (due to the proximity of the Red Sea ports!), but as soon as Britain favoured Tewodros (or Kassa), Neguse turned to the French for support and that meant a break from Tewodros. Another factor in this complicated situation was that France was regarded as “the protector of the Catholic Church, especially in the Near East” (O’Mahoney, p.96; this included the Holy Land and the Lebanon but that is another matter!). There was a further divisive feature as England supported the Protestants while France regarded herself as “the protector” of Catholic interests” (O’Mahoney, p.96).

A further complication was this: Justin’s ministry (in the days of Pope Pius IX) was contiguous with the building of the Suez canal by the French (their diplomat and engineer, De Lessy, received his commission to build it in 1854) . Naturally the English were concerned since whoever controlled the new canal would have first rights to the Red Sea (an English ‘right’ up to this!) and easy access to Africa to which Ethiopia was the obvious corridor. This is one of the reasons why France at the time of Justin supported both Tewodros and Neguse – hedging their bets!

Not to be outdone, the Italians became involved when Fr Leone (the Capuchin bursar of Bishop Massaia) wrote to the Italian Prime Minister “after the opening of Suez, Abyssinia will offer great opportunities for European commerce” (O’Mahoney, p.99).

So Justin became immersed in politics even though that was the last thing in the world that he had desired! In 1860 on the arrival of Count Russel (the French representative) Justin commented at Mass that the ambassador’s arrival was “like the star of Bethlehem announcing the birth of a new age” (O’Mahoney, p.102)!

If only that had been the case! For it was soon after that Justin was imprisoned by Tewodros. His wry comment in a letter to Fr Delmonte (9th Feb. 1860) which he managed to smuggle out of his prison was “I am caged with the mules, horses and cows, in fact I am treated like a king” (O’Mahoney, p.105).

Returning to the C20 (!), we found the climate moderate to warm, though the city lies on the foothills of the famous **Simien Mountains** whose peaks are 4000 metres high (4th highest in Africa) and very cold at night..

Surprise in our Tour of the Castle Complex

In the meantime, Girmay had been chatting with the ‘spruiker’ (my name for the assistant to the driver of Ethiopian ‘taxis’ who would lean out of the machine to yell out to people by the roadside to attract passengers) who said “yes” he did know a place to stay. As we ascended the final hill we passed the **Castle complex**, and moved through the main square to what looked like an ordinary fence. However there was a gate there leading to a ‘hotel’ where we booked in for the night. It was really a youth hostel but the rooms were clean if tiny. After settling in we went off for lunch in a restaurant heavy with ‘atmosphere’ – typical Ethiopian fare and very good (Girmay knew about it from an earlier visit).

It was then time to visit the feature of Gonder, the **Castle complex, or Royal Enclosure** , an area of 76,000 square metres, featuring five castles (of local stone) and showing influence of the Portuguese, Akxumite (also spelled 'Axumite') and Indian (?) rulers of the city at different times in its history.

On entering, after paying triple Girmay’s fee (privilege of foreigners), we then learnt that there was no guide since it was Sunday! Also no sooner had we started our self-directed tour that I noticed my (electronic) camera showed up a sign ‘no memory’, which meant I

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could not use it! By now I was becoming angry. Furthermore there were few signs explaining the history of these wonderful castles. Certainly we gained a marvellous view of the city and the surrounding mountains by climbing up to the roof of one castle. But, by this time I was telling anyone in sight what I thought of the situation! There were two young Ethiopian girls, students, sitting on the lawn. G asked them if they knew anything about the palace at which we were gazing. No, they said, we're preparing for exams!. Well that made me madder than ever and I started to lecture them on how important it was to know their history etc. Well of course, G started laughing and then the girls did too! So I decided to calm down and enjoy the views which were as I said fantastic on this glorious day. Fortunately G's camera was working so I have a number of his shots which came out very well. Soon we found ourselves traipsing up and down stairs, peering over battlements and imagining what had gone on in this series of quite exceptional palaces in a setting that was just glorious.

We then moved over to a large hall with signs of great activity. A young man approached us telling us they were preparing an exhibition and workshop for the Orthodox Church. The hall had been used for banquets and other formal occasions and during "the Italian Occupation", as they call it, the Italians had put on a new roof uncharacteristically ugly – a series of concrete slabs laid across the ceiling!

We decided to have a cup of coffee in a small 'tent' nearby and started talking (a marvellous Ethiopian pastime!) to two chaps one of whom spoke good English. He sympathised with me about the lack of guides or pamphlets and also talked about Ethiopia in a very open way, so that was great.

The Lalibela Experience

Next morning we took a taxi to the airport, had our usual lengthy wait, boarded the familiar Fokker Friendship and took off with little fuss. It turned out to be a bumpy ride since we flew over parched earth and mountains – it was really more of a mountainscape than a landscape! Within 40 minutes we landed and noticed that instead of the usual taxis there were a series of 4 wheel drives. Fortunately they put me in the front seat for the long and fascinating drive (18 km) gave me an incredible view of this part of the country – mountains upon mountains with their accompanying valleys: we would go down into a valley, rise up the side of a mountain and drop down again only to face another mountain! We passed people walking along the road as usual, women with loads, children running in all directions, men trudging along with their mules.

I was fascinated not only by the inevitable curves, ups and downs of the road but after each major hill another spectacular view sprang into sight until suddenly the biggest of them all – one of the grandest sights I have seen in my life – an immense mountain whose ridge ran across the sky for some kilometres. To the right a round fortress-like massive rock which at first I thought was a castle. As I was gazing at this phenomenon Girmay told me to glance down the rock face to see the **monastery** building tucked under its summit and extending along a line just a little below the ridge. The building was so designed that I had not even noticed it when gazing at the mountain (altitude of 2,630 metres.)

By now we had started the long and arduous climb up the mountain and as each hairpin bend was negotiated the views down the valley and away to the “wild craggy mountains and vast rocky escarpments” (Briggs 331) were sensational. The villages below fitted so snugly into the landscape that they too were not visible at first glance; of a night the whole valley is in darkness for there is no electricity in these villages.

Another hairpin bend and suddenly the town of Lalibella appeared, about $\frac{3}{4}$ way up this large mountain range. Then houses appeared, some clinging to the ridge, others appeared to be flowing down the mountain.

Our hotel, the “Seven Olives”, had once hosted Emperor Heile Selassie on his visit to Lalibela. Since then the rooms have become rather tawdry and I as a foreigner had to pay (a Government tax!) considerably more than Girmay. However the marvellous view overlooking the town and the valleys and mountains in the distance – a glorious view at night also – made this stay memorable

During lunch Girmay inquired about a guide for the rock churches; a young man who had been chatting to friends on the other side of the room came over and introduced himself. He is student for the Orthodox ministry who guides in his spare time. His English was quite good and a pleasant lad once I got to know him.

The Spectacular Rock Churches

After lunch, we left the hotel and walked down the hill to a gate where an Orthodox priest asked us to sign a paper and pay to visit the rock churches and tombs. Then the three of us walked further downhill and caught a breathtaking view of the far off mountains.

Resuming our walk, suddenly I looked up to see rising out of the ground as it were the tip of a stone building! This was the first ‘rock church’ I had ever seen; and it was literally chiselled out of the solid rock that continued the pavement on which we had been walking! Hence the name “Rock Churches” of Lalibala.

These **Rock Churches**, regarded by many as the “8th wonder of the world”, are on the world heritage list. Built to resemble **Jerusalem**, there are three groups of these hewn churches, carved out of rock in (traditionally) the reign of the 12th century king **Lalibela**. The first (6

hewn churches) represents the **Earthly Jerusalem**, while the 2nd group represents the **Heavenly Jerusalem** (mostly up in the nearby mountains), while a 3rd group come under the name of St George.

At the outset I was preoccupied with keeping upright in negotiating the worn steps in my heavy boots. As I was sliding about my ‘friend’ took pity on me and when we came to a difficult descent or climb he would hold my arm and I must admit I was glad he did! Afterwards he asked me what I was going to do in my retirement! At first I was shocked then I half denied it and then gave a few suggestions of possible work for an old codger (I didn’t used that Aussie word!). He didn’t bat an eyelid, just kept ensuring I didn’t fall into the innumerable spaces left between the present walls and the virginal rock face. So gradually I became more impressed with this deacon, called Muchaw Deribe (the first name he received at baptism, the second is his father’s name). He explained the features of one church after another, described the rituals various monks were performing since he knew many of the monks. Since it was the Orthodox Palm Sunday there were many ceremonies on – at one stage I witnessed an extraordinary sight: we had just entered the forecourt of one of the churches as the Angelus was being recited by the priests, deacons and laity. Enclosed as it were by rock, some stood, others knelt in the rock forecourt, others stood bowing while above us the rock walls towered above us. The liturgy “came alive” for me at that moment!

Busy Places of Worship

Once inside I found every church was ‘busy’, crowded with monks and laity who knelt, sat or simply stretched out on the abundant carpets covering the rock floor. There were monks and people praying, oftentimes bowing in the eastern fashion as they recited their prayers. A bishop was seated near a young priest reading from an ancient manuscript; whenever the priest made a mistake, the bishop without ever glancing at the book would stop and correct him.! There were monks holding icons for us to kiss (and leave an offering); other monks

explaining the unusual features of these Ethiopian icons, hanging in abundant array all over the walls and ceilings – there was no such thing as an empty space!. Royalty through the centuries had donated many of these icons and other ‘treasures’. It was an experience of a lifetime for me.

Finally, why ‘Lalibela’? Well, legend has it that when giving birth to this regal child, honey bees surrounded the mother so the babe was named “honey-eater”, the translation of ‘lalibela’!

The Magnificent Akxum

We arrived in Akxum (which is also spelled 'Axum') by plane from Lalibella and after booking in at a hotel, we began our tour of this most important and impressive town.

Akxum and its surrounds are an archaeologist’s (and historian’s) dream, since from early times there was a close connection between Egypt and ‘Nubia’ (as Ethiopia was then called). It was said they were as one country. Also there are ruins of many **pagan temples** which predate the arrival of Christians here.

Girmay took me first of all to the **Museum of Akxum**, situated in **Stele Park**, an ancient royal cemetery (Note: We prefer the word ‘obelisk’ for these tapering shafts of stone frequently found in Egypt). As we entered the Museum we heard a British voice explaining to a group of people the artefacts on display. We heard later he was one of the archaeologists from Cambridge University, one of a number of universities involved in the archaeological diggings in Ethiopia. A gentleman came up to ask us if we needed a guide. When we said ‘Yes’ he introduced himself as an archaeologist (Ethiopian) who helps in the ‘digs’. He really ‘took’ to us and we ‘hired’ him (at a very reasonable price) for two days!

We were told the stages of Aksum's history: Pre-Christian & Pre-Aksumite, Aksumite (C4-7 AD) and Late Aksumite (C7-1167); after that date (so after c.2500 years), Aksum declined while **Lalibella** took over from C12 on. Our guide informed us that the skilled people from Aksum built the rock churches of Lalibella..

We were shown a selection of the 14 types of **Aksumite Crosses** archaeologists have discovered. For centuries many of these have been copied and used in liturgies and , of recent times, on sale to tourists (including myself!). One of these was the one Frementus (Bishop) of Alexandria received when he came to Ethiopia to display the “Holy Covenant”. The story goes like this: Moses received two sets of Commandments at Sinai: the first fell from Moses hands and broke so he carved another set which was blessed by God and placed in a gold box. However Moses, still praying on the mountain, managed to secure the first set also, so he brought down **two sets** of the Commandments!. Eventually these were given to King David who made another gold box for the second set (I don't know who made the first box!)..

Now these **two gold boxes** were given by David to his son **Solomon**: Jerusalem has the original and Bethlehem has the replica. Along comes the Queen of Sheba who, when she heard of the “**two commandments**” travelled with 700 loaded camels to the Holy Land. She fell pregnant to Solomon and that is how the first great king of Ethiopia, **Menelik I** (or was it Gabra Meskil?) was born! Furthermore she brought home to Ethiopia the 2nd set of commandments (!) which is now housed in a special shrine associated with the **Covenant** between God and the Chosen People in Aksum) . Our guide was very keen on the Queen of Sheba and managed to introduce her at various times during our tour of the Aksum sites. A sample: she travelled to the Yemen and built a second palace there; it was here they gave her the name ‘Sheba’ = ‘lioness’ (in Arabic!).

He waxed eloquent concerning the 402 ‘steles’ (we call them ‘obelisks’) in the city registered by UNESCO, of which 66 encircled

the compound we were investigating. The biggest – and most obvious – is 20.5 m. tall and extends 2.6 m below the surface of the ground, and is 370 ton in weight. They are all of one piece and truly awesome. The Italians ‘stole’ the second largest and erected it in Rome, near the Colosseum; recently they promised to restore it. During Mussolini’s time they brought it up the Red Sea in three pieces, which does not please the Ethiopians!

Our friend took us underground by the first stele to a series of tombs excavated by the British and other archaeologists. From the top of the hill we could see the **Adwa** mountains to the east (the Italians were defeated by the Ethiopians at Adwa in 1896), a chain of mountains linked with the **Semeins** (run to the border with Eritrea). Between these two areas there are **248 archaeological sites** (in a 65 km stretch!)

The decline of Akxum (after c.2500 years) came when the capital was transferred to **Lalibella** where, according to the tradition, the skilled artisans from Akxum built the ‘Rock Churches’

Mekele, The Capital of Tigre

As we left Akxum, we noticed from the airport a hill of rock in the distance on which a building was perched like “as shag on a rock”. On enquiry we were told it was a C6 Monastery!

The highlight of our flight occurred as we approached Mekele airport. The city itself sits in the curve of the U shaped high mountain ridge surrounding it. Coming into land we flew over the city then rose to miss the awesome ridge on top of which lay the tarmac! Was I happy that our plane was the reliable ‘Friendship’!

Mekele is the provincial capital of the very ancient province of **Tigre**. A reminder of its past glory is the (once!) elegant palace of the Emperor Yohannes IV.

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We were met by a Vincentian Brother, **Georgio Bab** ('Bab' is his father's name) who teaches in the school, runs a library and helps caring for the "street kids" (a term they use!). He drove us to the Vincentian Residence where we were welcomed by a young and dapper Vincentian priest, Fr **Frehewet**, the Headmaster of the local Catholic School, which has 890 students (taught daily in two shifts!).

Georgio drove us to a "community library" for the young ones. Catholic Charities had built the building for storing grain at one time but later gave it to the local church. Georgio & friends took it over, borrowed and begged for books for the young ones – especially those unable to attend school. Though they can't afford electricity for lighting, there were 40 or so sitting at the tables, reading (in the dim light of a few high windows) with great intensity and in perfect quiet.

In the afternoon we toured the city. We noticed a large Salesian complex. They run many schools and other institutes for youth especially in this part of the country and their reputation is great not only among Catholics but the community at large. One of the Salesians is quite an entrepreneur with a great ability to collect funds in the US and Europe!

We stopped for yet another cup of tea/coffee (coffee is grown extensively in this country and exported) at **the Daughters of Charity** compound. The Sisters there remember our Australian Daughters, Srs Bridget and Mave. They run a number of works for the poor and needy, including a very sophisticated eye clinic. I remarked on the "state of the art" equipment there and the English Daughter in charge mentioned that two medical faculties in Spain send both surgeons and equipment to them. As often happens one group is critical of the other so the clinic benefits by receiving the latest equipment!

Adigrat, a City Crucial to St Justin's Story

After two days we boarded a land rover owned by the Daughters and used for supplying their houses with the necessities of food and medicine as well as transporting the sick to hospitals. On this trip (to Adigrat and then on to Alitena), Girmay and myself were crammed into the front seat with the driver (a cousin of one of the Sisters), while the back and roof were stacked with bags of wheat, beds, mattresses and other supplies for the Daughters' clinics on the way to and at Alitena. The driver would stop in the middle of nowhere, 4 or 5 youths would appear and drag the mattresses or whatever off the top of the wagon and start walking off into the bush to their village. Every stop was for at least 15 minutes as news and gossip had to be exchanged!.

While the road to Adigrat had been reasonable the government appointed Chinese contractors to construct a new road (adjacent to the old one) up to the tableland and then on from there. Well, they have finished the basic work on the new road but not yet sealed it so we had to drive on the old road which for some unknown reason they had stripped the macadam off it; consequently we sailed into and over potholes in abundance.

Despite the bumps and tosses, the views were magnificent, as over every ridge there appeared another range of jagged mountains in the background with their accompanying deep valleys. Some of these mountain ranges lay on an immense slant as if the Creator when forming them squashed his hand over them to quieten them down! I remembered seeing similar awesome sights in the lower Jordan Valley of the Holy Land. No doubt there is a connection between the two sites as on this present road we were only 100 km or so from the extension of the Great Rift Valley which runs (at least) from the Lebanon down the Jordan (including the Lake of Galilee and the Dead Sea), through to the Red Sea and then further south into the great Ethiopian Rift Valley, where some years ago the skeleton of a woman

was found and dated by the experts as living some two million years ago. Remember hearing about ‘Lucy’?

Eventually we reached **Adigrat**, the second largest city in **Tigre**. Its importance comes from its position at the junction of significant roads from all points of the compass. In the valley approaching the city we observed a camel train bringing **salt** from places near the Rift Valley to the city. For all intents and purposes it looked like a biblical scene!

As we entered the city Girmay reminisced concerning his high school days: he pointed out the secondary school and then further on the primary school he had attended and finally the house where he boarded while at school (there was no school at his hometown, Alityna). Sad to say “the old days” he experienced were horrific (the country being under the Communists then), so I came to appreciate his family and himself. Without going into detail (the ‘story’ is not pleasant), may I repeat his concluding statement: “the system was totally corrupt and imprisonment and murder were used simply to dominate not only those who disapproved of their system, but ...anyone the individual Communists did not like or wished to get rid of”!

On arrival at the centre of Adigrat, we found ourselves among the locals cheering the young recruits in military trucks heading off for war with Eritrea. The political situation was tense at the moment and Adigrat is only a short distance away from what might be called the “front line”. The saddest part of it all is that these youngsters (they looked between 15 and 18) were thrilled by the cheering crowds and eager to “join the battle”. I suppose this has been the case through all of history but I had never experienced it first hand before. I must admit I was shaken and shocked!

We headed for the magnificent **Church of St Justin de Jacobis** on our right as we entered town. Alongside it the fine Diocesan Seminary where a number of Vincentians are on the teaching staff. We met Fr O’Mahoney, author of two volumes on St Justin de Jacobis, who

lectures there. After visiting the church we moved to the seminary refectory where we enjoyed a meal. They suggested I have a rest before the next leg of the journey to **Alityna**.

Alityna, the Key to Justin's Success

If the journey to Adigrat had been a little uncomfortable, the next 'leg' was very rough indeed. While the first section of the road was sealed, we soon took to the rough and tough final 60 km (or more). Though the scenery was spectacular as we climbed up and around mountains only to sweep down again into the valleys, the road was only passable with a land rover, especially during the last hour or so! Anyway we finally reached Alityna, a hamlet which is 99% Catholic!

As Girmay was born and bred in a small village on a mountain (literally) about an hour's walk (rough and tough!) away, he was in his element when we arrived there. We went straight to the Daughters' compound on the top of a hill upon which the ancient Church stands. Despite the 'renovations' still being in full swing, the Sisters gave us rooms there, so we were only a short distance from the church. That night we attended the Easter Midnight Mass which lasted two and a half hours! The whole town was involved, so people were everywhere – inside and outside the church.

The ceremony was noisy as there was continuous singing/chanting (all the ceremonies are in Amharic, a very ancient Church language), with loads of lighted candles, incense and processions. The tradition of men on one side and women on the other continues here. Yet those inside the church were joined with those outside on about four occasions, including the beginning of Mass when all received a lighted candle (not like our tiny ones; these were big and on fire!) for which they processed up to the sanctuary. Then, after the Gospel they returned to hand the candles back, only to return again before the Offertory procession when light and fire was called for! I had the impression of a constant ebb and flow in the ceremony which was pleasing.

Next day, Easter Sunday, I walked around the village. I could not get over the awesome feeling of being surrounded by high mountains so close to us that you could almost touch them! I would see people walking up these mountains to arrive at their villages. Girmay told me that if someone fell very ill the local priest had to walk up to visit the village – it may take three or four hours; then he would walk the same distance back. You clearly have to be tough to work here!

This town is Catholic simply because of St Justin! Everyone is loyal to the Church because of his great work among them. Many of the priests and sisters we talked to came from here; the present bishop lived here. Unfortunately I was not able to visit his **cave** where he hid from his enemies.

On his arrival in the town he was welcomed by the chief of the local tribe (called Irob) who accepted him on the condition he promise never to abandon them because of any persecution. He agreed and the whole group became Catholic – even now the population is 99% Catholic! His loyalty to the local tribe paid off as they were refused to let “the enemy” take him away or kill him.

I walked up to the small (diocesan) Seminary to which is attached the famous **Chapel** built by St Justin and which has stood there for 170 years. I was shocked to see that the refurbishment of the chapel and rooms around it has retained only about an 1/8 of his original chapel (built by his own hands). It is a great shame as although it has cracks in it this is a sacred relic from the life of St Justin and the Church of his time which suffered so much for living out their faith. .

Something similar happened at **Adigrat** where they pulled down the small seminary which Justin had built – the first Catholic seminary in Ethiopia. Now just a cross marks the spot. .

Return to Adigrat

After our short but fascinating stay, we left Alitena about 8 a.m. with Girmay driving. Including myself there were 5 passengers, one a very sick lady being taken to hospital in Adigrat. As is often the case, the return journey seemed to take only about half the time of the earlier one! I was more relaxed as well although the first 7 or so km was still pretty scary as we circled around each mountain, drove up and down and across valleys on this incredibly narrow and uneven track! For all that, the scenery was marvellous and the time passed quickly.

We arrived in Adigrat, after the 2 hour drive, at 10 a.m. and immediately headed for the Seminary complex. Welcomed by the staff, we enjoyed a meal, then after a siesta then motored up a mountain side to a complex of Catholic sites sheltered by a tall concave ridge or rock. There we had a glorious view across the valley to the centre of Adigrat and then up to the mountains where to the right we had gone to Alityna, and to the left leads to **Adwa** (another important town in Justin's time and the site of the Italian defeat in the not so distant past). We entered the Salesian compound where they have their seminary. Both staff and student greeted us warmly as Girmay knows them quite well. They gave us a tour of their fine complex.

We walked left from there into a small convent area owned by the sisters of St Lucy, an Italian community whose Provincial, Sr Virginia, speaks excellent English. After being shown over their house (used as a retreat centre), she guided us through a small gate to the small chapel of St Justin which he carved out of the mountain stone. The Sisters keep it beautifully neat and clean. His books and vestments are still lying there. She opened the secret door to the hiding place of St Justin at the back of the chapel. This too he carved out of rock! This was necessary as he was at risk constantly of being murdered by his enemies. The tiny altar, also carved out of the rock where he said Mass is preserved, thank God and the Sisters! Unfortunately the tiny seminary he built – also out of rock – was dismantled; now there is

only a small plaque there. We thanked her sincerely for caring for St Justin's home at the place he called **Golah**.

To my question "Why did he choose this spot?", Sister replied "Look at that view in front of you!". It was truly magnificent but there was something else. He had come here on his way from **Adawa** (over 150 km away) where he started his mission; he wanted to build a small residence and training centre for priests between Adigrat and Adwa. From this site he could view the entire valley, enabling him to be warned of the arrival of any enemy. There was plenty of water here and the soil was good for growing the small amount of food he required. Justin stayed here despite constant persecution, until life became too hazardous, so he moved on to **Aliteyna** and, as mentioned above, hid in a cave, an hour's walk away from the present town, until the local tribe accepted and protected him.

A Concluding Word

As we flew back to Addis I felt very happy and privileged to have experienced the sights, sacred and otherwise, of the last two weeks. Given that there was little time while teaching to 'see' places, the wait was fortuitous. It enabled me to absorb a degree of the Ethiopian life and culture, to realise what an incredible history these people enjoy and how our Vincentian Saints, Justin and Gebre Michael, are continuing their great missionary work through the present generation of Vincentians and Daughters of Charity.

Bibliography

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