

The Christian Testimony of Bl. Isidore Bakanja (1887-1909)

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When African Christians look for a model of how they should respond to the call of the Gospel despite the many difficulties that they face, Bl. Isidore Bakanja provides an example of the power of Christian witness that often lies untapped in the hearts of those who have completed their Christian initiation. This short paper, outlines the circumstances in which this modern martyr lived and died in order to draw attention to the generosity with which he responded to the light of Christ when it was first revealed to him. His story challenges each one of us, in our diversity, to reflect on the implications of having only one common Father in heaven.

Bakanja belonged to the Boangi tribe, who lived in the eastern part of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, the former Zaïre. His father, Iyonzwa, and his mother, Inyka, were pagans and Isidore was born sometime between 1884 and 1885 at Bokendela, a small village in the deep equatorial rain forest, not very far from the stream known as Botato, one of the many tributaries of Congo river. In 1904, when he was about 20 years old, Bakanja left Bokendela, travelling on a small boat made of wood as far as Mbandaka (also called Coquihatville) where he hoped to find work. At first he worked as an assistant mason building houses for the Belgian workers at Mbandaka and it was while working there that he first heard of Christianity.

One of those among whom Isidore worked was Linganga, the first Christian that Isidore ever met, who was studying the Catechism with a view to becoming members of the Catholic Church. Through Linganga, Bakanja was introduced to Father Gregory Van Dun and Father Robert Brepols, two Cistercian Monks who were running the Saint Eugen Parish of Bolokwa Nsimba, not far from Mbandaka. It

was under their guidance that he learned how to make the sign of the Cross and to say the usual prayers (Our Father, Hail Mary etc.). He began to study the Catechism and he learned about the Creed, the seven Sacraments of the Church, the Ten Commandments, the six commandments of the Church and the seven Deadly Sins. He began to attend Mass and he also learned some of the Catholic devotional prayers, such as the Rosary, the Way of the Cross, the *Angelus* etc.). The Cistercian Priests also introduced Bakanja to the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which was given to all the newly baptised Christians who desired it after they had been instructed in its significance and purpose.

After three years of training in preparation for Baptism, Bakanja applied for the Sacrament and, having been formally accepted, he was baptised on May 6th 1906 at Saint Peter Claver Parish, Mbandaka, and he was given the Christian name of Isidore, putting him under the patronage and protection of Saint Isidore. His godfather was Boniface Bakutu. After his Baptism, he was enrolled in the Scapular Confraternity and he began to wear the Brown Scapular of our Lady of Mount Carmel, which was known as *Bonkoto Malia*, Mary's habit, in the local language. On May 25th 1906, Isidore received the Sacrament of Confirmation and, a year later, on August 8th 1907, he completed the process of his Christian initiation when he receives his Saviour, Jesus Christ, for the first time in the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Having completed his own Christian initiation, Isidore became a catechist, helping others who were making the same journey in faith that he himself had made. By the example of his own daily life, he showed the catechumens under his care that honesty, hard work, love and respect for all were the means by which Christians testify to their life in union with Jesus Christ.

Finding work was not always easy and, having returned to his village for a time, Isidore eventually found work during 1907 at Busira-Lokumo, where he stayed with Camille Boyna, his nephew. Working as a general domestic servant or ‘house-boy’ for the *Société Anonyme Belge*, he was assigned to a Belgian called Reynders, who was an agent of a rubber production company. In 1908, Isidore followed Reynders moved upriver to a place called Ikili, where the manager of the rubber estate was André Van Cauter, a man given to unpredictable rages and occasional brutality if the production of rubber was less than he expected. In Ikili, Isidore was conscientious about his work and he got on well with Reynders, who was aware that Van Cauter was fiercely opposed to Christianity and who warned Isidore to conceal his faith as much as possible. When Van Cauter challenged Isidore about his work in the house, Isidore said:

I always do very well all that I have to do, and is anything lacking?

For Isidore, the salary was not the only goal and he believed that it was important to do one’s work as well and as conscientiously as possible.

Isidore made prayer part of his daily routine and he was happy to explain to the other workers who were interested about the Gospel and about his prayers. Van Cauter was strongly opposed to this kind of activity and, because of the growing opposition that he faced because of his Christianity, Isidore asked Van Cauter for a letter allowing him to leave the rubber plantation and return to his home but Van Cauter replied:

I will not give you any such letter! ... ask your God for that kind of letter! I will not give it to you!

Van Cauter ordered him to stop teaching his Christian faith to the other workers:

You'll have the whole village praying and no one will work.

On one occasion when Isidore was praying the rosary in public, Van Cauter commented:

I don't want to see that contraption here. Go hide it in your box; you're here to work and not mumble prayers.

On another occasion, when Van Cauter saw his Brown Scapular, he said to Isidore:

Bakanja, take that contraption off your neck. It is disgusting. I don't want to see that contraption of stupid priests here anymore.

When Van Cauter saw Isidore wearing the Brown Scapular again, a few days later, on February 2nd 1909, he became very angry and said:

What's the meaning of this? What? I told you to take that thing off. Why didn't you do it? Since you don't want to take it off, you're really going to get it.

When Isidore refused to remove his Scapular, he was given over a hundred blows with a whip of elephant hide with nails on the end. Van Cauter himself said to Isidore:

I'm thrashing you because you are teaching the stupid priests' prayers and all sorts of stupidities to my workers, to my servant-boys, and even to the villagers. If that does not stop, no one will want to work anymore for me because of the stories of stupid priests.

Afterwards, as he was lying in a pool of his own blood, Isidore seems to have realised that he was seriously injured and might not survive. He was heard to say, apparently about Van Cauter:

He did not want me to pray to God ... He killed me because I said my prayers ... I stole nothing from him ... It's because I was praying to God.

After the beating, Van Cauter ordered Isidore to be chained and hidden away in a room that was used as a rubber factory, apparently so that what he had done would not become generally known. Isidore said to his friend Moya Mputsu:

God alone knows whether I will die of these wounds, or if I will live ... if you meet the priests, tell them that I am dying because I am a Christian ... I don't feel anything good in my body anymore.

When Van Cauter heard that a mission of inspection was coming, he forced Isidore to go to Isoko, so that the inspectors would not see that he had been mistreated. Isidore said that he would be unable for the journey because of the wounds but Van Cauter insisted. Isidore then set out on the journey but he was forced to stop to rest in the forest not long after setting out.

One of those who knew him, a man called Iyongo, helped Isidore to hide himself under the trees and he also brought him some food and clothes. On the February 6th 1909, another man, Moya Mputsu, organised that Isidore was shown to Inspector Dorpinghaus who later wrote:

I saw a man come from the forest with his back torn apart by deep, festering, malodorous wounds, covered with filth,

assaulted by flies. He leaned on two sticks in order to come to me - he wasn't walking; he was dragging himself.

The inspector took Isidore home so that his wounds would heal, but Isidore seems to have realised that he would not recover his health and he said:

If you see my mother, or if you go to the judge, or if you meet a Priest, tell them that I am dying because I am a Christian.

On July 24th 1909, Fr. Gregoire administered the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and heard Isidore's confession. During their conversation, Isidore tried to explain Van Cauter's motives to the priest:

He did not want me to wear the scapular ... He yelled at me when I said my prayers.

When Fr. Gregoire recommend to Isidore to forgive his persecutor, Isidore said:

I am not angry with the white man ... He beat me. That's his business; it is none of mine. He should know what he is doing. ... Certainly, I shall pray for him. When I am in heaven, I shall pray for him very much.

Isidore's condition continued to deteriorate because of his wounds. He was never without his rosary. He is quoted as saying:

It is nothing if I die. If God wants me to live, I'll live! If God wants me to die, I'll die. It's all the same to me.

After six months of prayer and suffering, he died, rosary in hand and scapular around his neck. The date of his death has not been established with certainty but it seems to have been either August 8th or 15th 1909.

Isidore's attitude towards his work, and his witness in defending his right to practice his faith despite opposition, were an example for his fellow workers and it was, in part, due to the way he had treated Isidore that Van Cauter was eventually sent for trial by the Dorpinghaus, General Controller of the rubber plantation.

When visiting Africa in 1980, Pope St John Paul II said of Isidore:

After having given all his free time to the evangelization of his brothers as a catechist, he did not hesitate to offer his life to God, strong in the courage he found in his faith and in the faithful recitation of the Rosary ...

Pope St John Paul II beatified Isidore Bakanja on April 24th 1994. During the Beatification ceremony, the Pope addressed these words to Bl. Isidore Bakanja:

In an Africa that is sorely tried by ethnic strife, your shining example is an encouragement to harmony and reconciliation among the children of the same heavenly Father. You showed brotherly love to all, without distinction of race or social class; you earned the esteem and respect of your companions, many of whom were not Christians. In this way, you show us that dialogue between people is necessary.

The feast day of Bl. Isidore Bakanja is celebrated on the 12th of August.