

The First Missionaries' Work in Africa: Ivory Coast Case Study

Benjamin Yavo OFM

Introduction

All Christians are missionaries. However, some people dedicate themselves especially for missionary activities. And through their laborious work, the Gospel reached many parts of the world. Ivory Coast, country situated in West Africa, knew Christianity through missionary work. After many trials, the first missionaries succeeded to put a strong foundation to Christianity into this country. This article will try to elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of the first missionaries in Ivory Coast and the lessons to take from it. To do so, three parts will constitute the article. First, a brief story of the beginning of mission in this country will be given. After that, from that story the strengths and weaknesses of the missionaries will be exposed. Lastly, the lessons from it will follow.

Brief Story of the First Missions in Ivory Coast

Mission in Ivory Coast begins in the 17th Century. In fact, the first attempt of evangelization began in 1637 with five Capuchins who lived for a short time in Assinie (a town in the south of the country), before being swept away by diseases. The first Ivorian baptized was named Aniaba, son of a chief in Ivory Coast. *Nouvelle Evangelisation* gives some details explaining that in 1687 during a military and religious expedition sent by King Louis XIV of France, he was brought back to France. He received a French education and was baptized by the bishop Bossuet, with Louis XIV as godfather. In 1700, Aniaba returned to his country and immediately afterwards became pagan.

Another attempt was in 1742 with the Franciscans who tried to settle in the same region, but a year later they succumbed under the lances of the pagans. From that time until the end of the nineteenth century, Christianity had hardly succeeded in establishing itself in this country.

However, a progress came in 1893, when Ivory Coast became a French colony. Binger Gustav, governor of this colony, immediately opened some schools to train the interpreters and employees of the administration, necessary to assist French officials. Since he observed that in other French colonies in West Africa, public schools were often entrusted to missionaries, he sent in 1895 a letter to the Society of African Missions of Lyon, founded in 1856 Bishop Marion Brésilla, to ask for missionaries.

From 1895 to 1896 some priest of the Society of African Missions such as Emile Bonhomme, Pierre Meraud, Mathieu Ray, Julien Bailleul and Hammard, landed in the south of the country and founded the first missions of Memni, Grand-Bassam, Moosou and Dabou (D'Almeida).

The new governor of the colony, M. Mouttet, seeing the success of this enterprise, urged the Prefect Apostolic to multiply his efforts. Thus, in 1898, the missionaries were seconded by the nuns of the congregation Our Lady of the Apostles (Baur 147). They immediately invested in the management of schools and the foundation of orphanages and dispensaries.

During the first years of evangelization the missionaries met many obstacles: yellow fever and malaria, fires, drownings. Despite these so many trials, there were always substituted by others. As a matter of fact, a year after their arrival in Ivory Coast, the first missionaries met an epidemic of yellow fever. Many of them died. However, others came to substitute them. Among the new comers, two fathers Bedel and Fer, escorted by a catechist, Louis Ouandété, went to evangelize the north of the country. In 21 days, they travel about 500 kilometres on foot. They passed by Dabou, Tiassalé, Toumodi, Bouaké, Katiola, Korhogo. They latter came back through Abengourou, and the river Comoé in pirogue (D'Almeida).

Finally, in the twentieth century came the mass conversions and it was necessary to multiply the apostolic prefectures, not only in the forest but also in the savannah zone.

From 1900, the face of the mission changed, following the republican law, which decreed the separation of the Church and the State. One of the reasons of this separation was the disagreement between the missionaries and the government about the abolition of slavery (Hasting 430). Adrian Hasting clarified that, from this misunderstanding,

the bond of the Church and State were severed, religious orders were expelled from France, diplomatic relations with the Vatican terminated. While missionaries were not expelled from French Africa, their subsidies were terminated, their schools closed, and deprived of State assistance, they were expected to pack up and go (430).

In other words, the missionaries were forbidden to teach in schools and did not receive any allocation for the missions any more. Despite that, they decided to continue their mission, and initiated some activities to gain money. They bought a field of cocoa in order to support their mission (D'Almeida). Driven out of schools, they decided to intensify the visits of the villages and to install the catechetical structures where they had received a favourable reception from the chief and the population. Thus, the progress of evangelization did not stop, but took another turn, turning more towards the interior of the country where Islam progressed considerably.

In 1904 and 1908, Korhogo and Katiola that were the main cities of the North, received the Catholic missions, even if the population remained rather still and even hostile to the Christian religion.

From 1922, following international agreements, the French Government authorized the opening of private schools. The missionaries, seizing this opportunity, again embarked on the founding of schools and their governance with the help of lay staff. The whole country saw the creation of many Catholic schools,

including the minor seminary of Bingerville in 1936, followed by the major seminary of Anyama in 1956.

In this period of evangelization, the number of missionaries increased and they were better prepared for the accomplishment of the mission. As reinforcement for the European missionaries also came the native priests, the first of whom, René Kouassi, was ordained in 1934 and the second, Bernard Yago, in 1947.

From 1937, Catholic Action movements made a timid appearance. But their true golden age extended after 1945. The Catholic Youth Workers (JOC), the ACF (Catholic Action of the Families, conceived as the adult branch of the JOC), Scouts, the Legion of Mary, the Catholic Youth Students (JEC) and the JAC (Catholic Agricultural Youth) mobilized the most dynamic and generous young people and adults until the launching of national or local branches.

In 1960, The Vatican considered this country strong enough to be set up as dioceses in its own right, led by the bishops chosen from among the native clergy.

With regard to the Ivory Coast, the choice was made on the prelate Bernard Yago, who after having received the episcopal ordination from the hands of Pope John XXIII, on May 8,, 1960, immediately succeeded the French archbishop of Abidjan, Bishop Jean Baptiste Boivin (Baur 388).

From then on, whenever a missionary bishop was to leave the Ivorian diocese that he governed, he was replaced by a son of the country. Ecclesial structures were thus transformed until 1975, the year in which all dioceses in Côte d'Ivoire had only indigenous bishops at their head.

In 1983, under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, came a new honour for the Ivorian Church, which received its first cardinal in the person

of Bishop Bernard Yago. He reached his age limit and was replaced by Monsignor Bernard Agré.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the First Missionaries

From the story above mentioned, many elements can be pointed out as strengths of the first missionaries. First of all, the missionaries used the building and running of schools, hospitals and orphanages as a ‘vehicle of evangelization’ (Dorr 225). In addition, they were ready to adapt themselves through other means of evangelization, when the government took back those means of evangelization.

Another strength, was their determination and courage for the preaching of the Good News. As a matter of fact, they were ready to sacrifice themselves in order to announce the Gospel. This can be seen with the example of Fathers Bedel and Fer who walked about 500 kilometres on foot, from the south to the north of the country just because of evangelization. Other than that, there is also the substitution of the missionaries after the death of others from diseases. Furthermore, their sacrifice is also showed by the work they did through the plantation of cocoa in order to sustain financially their mission.

A third strength is that there were open to collaborate with other missionaries from other congregations. That is why they made appeal to the nuns of the congregation Our Lady of the Apostles and managed to work with them.

In addition to this strength, there is also, the creation of many catholic schools for evangelization and seminaries for the future local clergy. In fact, they managed to form and replace the missionaries by the local clergy.

Finally, the missionaries, through the creation of Catholic action movements, succeeded to implicate the laity in the missionary activity. This helped a lot as for the spreading of the gospel by the local people themselves.

Besides this positive description, there is to notice some weaknesses to be attributed to these missionaries.

As weaknesses, they were not prepared to face the diseases they met. Hence, many of them died during their missions. The other weakness to be mentioned is the rejection of many Ivorian culture and practices. Frans Vertraelen explains it well when he says that ‘in the colonial period, “substitution” was characteristic of foreign missionary work’ (75). He goes further pointing that

with the introduction of the technically more developed medical care...the valuable contribution of traditional treatment of psychosomatic illnesses and the beneficial effects of certain traditional herbs with medicinal qualities were, however, simply disregarded. African concepts faith concepts were dismissed as superstitious; this dismissal applied not only to magic or witchcraft, but also to expressions of genuine religiosity’ (75).

Lessons to Keep From the First Missionaries in Ivory Coast

It is obvious that one should follow the example of the first missionaries in imitating their strengths and in working on their weaknesses. That is to say, to avoid the same errors like theirs. Nonetheless, in this part a stress on some church documents will help to appreciate some elements to consider in missionary activity.

There are two categories of the missionary. There are

those who focus primarily on the building up of the church both as a community and in its institutional aspects; and those who are primarily concerned not about the church but about certain key Christian values- living these values, giving witness to them, and promoting them in society. They may, for instance, be devoting their time and energy to building up primary health care system, or to literacy work, or to the promotion of human rights, or to working for liberation, or reconciliation (Dorr 194).

Both these aspects of mission can be identified in the first missionaries in Ivory Coast who were able to adapt themselves to the situation in which they were. In mission, there is not only a need of adaptation because ‘the difficulties seem insurmountable and could easily lead to discouragement’ (RM 35) but there is a great need for perseverance. Pius XII mentioned this point in *Fidei Donum*, as he asked the missionaries to ‘persevere trustingly in the task undertaken, [and to] be proud to serve the Church’ (Hickey 128).

Another lesson is the importance of collaboration or cooperation with other missionaries. This idea was repeated in many encyclical documents such as *Rerum Ecclesiae*, *Evangelii praecones*, *Ad gentes* 35-41 and *Redemptoris Missio* (77). In *Rerum Ecclesiae*, Pius XI said in the same line to missionaries, that ‘in the missions, do not hesitate to summon to your aid as your co-workers missionaries who are not of your own religious family’ (Hickey 70).

In addition, missionaries should have respect for existing customs. As taught by *Evangelii praecones* the office of the missionary and messenger of Christ ‘does not demand that he transplant European civilization and culture, and no other, to foreign soil, there to take root and propagate itself’ (qtd. in Hickey 99). Therefore the missionary should only teach Christ to others, rather than his culture.

Finally, there is not to neglect the formation of local clergy. Actually, Benedict XV through *Maximum Illud*, affirmed that ‘it is absolutely necessary to mould and build up an indigenous clergy in a way that is satisfactory (qtd. in Hickey 35). *Rerum Ecclesiae*, and *Evangelii Praecones* carried the same idea. As for *Evangelii Praecones* it added also the utility of schools for the young in order to establish ‘advantageous relationships between the missionaries and pagans of every class’ and help them ‘understand, appreciate and embrace Catholic doctrine’ (Hickey 91).

Conclusion

At the end of this article, it is worthy to mention that it was to show the strengths and weaknesses of the first missionaries in Ivory Coast and the lesson from it. In short, since 1898 Ivory Coast received the creation of the first missions. After many trials, the missionaries managed to plant the seed of a strong Christianity in this country. From their work, one can learn that a missionary of the gospel should give himself fully to the mission; he should adapt himself to every situation and find all means to carry the gospel to the people. He should cultivate perseverance and courage and mostly he should have a respect for the other culture in preaching not his own culture but Jesus Christ.

List of sources

- Baur, John. *2000 years of Christianity in Africa. An African History* 62-1992. Nairobi: Daughters of St Paul, 1994
- D'Almeida Charles: - *L'histoire Émouvante des Prêtres qui ont apporté l'évangile et l'école en Côte d'Ivoire* : <http://www.linodrome.com/afrique-monde/15384-l-histoire-emouvante-des-pretres-qui-ont-apporte-l-evangile-et-l-ecole-en-cote-d-ivoire>. Accessed 03 -10-18.
- Dorr, Donal. *Mission in Today's World*. New York: Oris Books, 2004.
- Hasting, Adrian. *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.
- Hickey, Raymond. *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*. Dublin: Dominican Publication, 1982.
- John Paul II. *Redemptoris Missio. On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate*: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html. Accessed 09-10-2018.
- Nouvelle Evangelisation : *Présence De L'Église Catholique En Côte D'ivoire* http://nouvl.evangelisation.free.fr/eglise_ivoirienne.htm. Accessed 03 -10-18.
- Vertraelen, Frans. *Christianity in a New Kew. New Voices and Vistas through Intercontinental Communication*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996.