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Notable Vincentians (7)
Luigi Montuori
The First Vincentian in Khartoum

BY
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The nineteenth century was in many ways the golden age of missionary activity in the Catholic Church. This was certainly true of the Congregation of the Mission. Although Vincent de Paul had hoped that his community would undertake missions "ad gentes," this never really happened in his lifetime. Only with the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 did foreign missions begin to play an important role in Vincentian ministries and even then it was primarily in China. In the nineteenth century the missionary apostolate expanded rapidly and dramatically. One focus of Vincentian missionary activity was Ethiopia, and one of the early missionaries, notable for the hardships he endured, was Luigi Montuori.

Montuori was born at Praiano, in the diocese of Amalfi, on 17 October 1798. He entered the Congregation of the Mission at Naples on 28 September 1816 and took his vows on 13 December 1818. He was ordained to the priesthood on 21 September 1822 at the house in Oria. After ordination his ministry centered almost entirely on missions, a principal function of the houses at Oria, Lecce, Bari, and Naples. One of his companions on these missions was a man with whom he would be associated for many years, Saint Justin de Jacobis.

De Jacobis was born on 9 October 1800 and entered the Congregation of the Mission at Naples on 17 October 1818. He took his vows two years later in Naples, after which he began his studies of philosophy and theology. He was ordained to the priesthood at the cathedral in Brindisi on 12 June 1824 and almost immediately undertook the ministry of preaching. In 1835 he was named director of novices but did not take up the office until a year later. Two years after that he was transferred to the Casa dei Vergini in Naples as assistant superior and in 1838 was named superior. Montuori was with De Jacobis in the house, holding the position of house treasurer.

The Vincentian Mission in Ethiopia

The first Vincentian in Ethiopia, and the first Catholic priest since the expulsion of the last Franciscan in 1797, was Father Giuseppe Sapeto (1811-1895). A native of northern Italy, he was long interested in going on the foreign missions. Because of his insistence he was sent to Syria before he had been ordained a priest. He was ordained in Syria in 1835 but did not remain long. A restless and perhaps eccentric character, he went to Palestine by way of Cairo in 1837. He quickly received a summons to return to his province, but he had already indicated to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (commonly called Propaganda) in Rome his desire to be a missionary in Ethiopia. Toward the end of 1837 he left Cairo for Ethiopia in the company of two Frenchmen, Antoine and Arnaud d'Abbadie, who were on a scientific expedition. He set up a mission in Adwa (Adowa), for which Propaganda gave him a patent as an apostolic missionary and which his superiors in the Vincentian Community accepted somewhat grudgingly. This was not a foreign mission in the accepted sense of the term, since a large portion of the Ethiopians were already Christian. The Ethiopian Church was monophysite, that is, it rejected the declaration of the Council of Chalcedon (451) on the two natures in Christ and held that there was only one. In addition to rejecting the authority of the Roman Pontiff, the Ethiopians mingled many animistic and superstitious elements in their religious practice.

Though Sapeto had no means of support he ingratiated himself with the local people by learning their language and adopting their customs. His reports to Rome interested Propaganda in widening the scope of the mission and putting it on a stable basis. Cardinal Giacomo Franson, the prefect, saw De Jacobis as the man for that task. In addition some of the local chieftains in Ethiopia were willing to accept papal authority as a means of obtaining military and political support from the Catholic powers of Europe. Thus began the Vincentian involvement in the Ethiopian mission.

Montuori had asked repeatedly both of his provincial and the superior general to be sent on the foreign missions. Permission was eventually granted, and in 1838 he was in Rome, studying Arabic. When De Jacobis was assigned to Ethiopia, Montuori joined him. De Jacobis left Naples for Rome on 4 February 1839 and was joined a few months later by Montuori. In Paris, on 10 May 1839, De Jacobis was officially named prefect apostolic of Abyssinia, which comprised most

of Eritrea, Tigray, and Gonder (or Gondar, the capital). Its population was predominantly Christian and semitic-speaking. On 24 May he and Montuori embarked at Civitavecchia for Ethiopia, together with Marc-Antoine Poussou, the prefect apostolic of the Vincentian missions in Syria, and two French Vincentians.

Their ship stopped at Malta, where they heard of an epidemic in Alexandria, their next port of call. As a result they went to Nasso in the Cyclades, where there was a Vincentian house. They stayed there a month, something for which they were apparently rebuked by the superior general, Jean-Baptiste Nozo. Hearing another report that the story of the epidemic was false, they set sail for Egypt and arrived at Alexandria on 4 July. From there they went to Cairo by camel. In Cairo the party attempted to buy some young female slaves from a Muslim dealer in order to free them and send them to Rome for instruction in the Catholic faith, but the dealer refused to sell to infidels. In Cairo they were joined by a Father Derodes, from the mission in Syria, a skilled physician.

On 23 August they left Cairo for Cosseir to catch a ship for Massawa. They sailed down the Nile during the hot season, a trip that lasted a fortnight. They arrived at Qena, which was near the ancient city of Thebes. They began their crossing of the Red Sea on 16 September. After both storms and becalming they reached Gedda, an important commercial center on the Asiatic coast of the Red Sea. The last stage of the journey, which was marked by tropical storms, took them to Dahlak, an archipelago before Massawa. During one of the storms, Montuori later wrote, "we asked the Arab captain and sailors, all of them agitated and fearful, and one and all, as Muslims and as a result, fatalistic, answered us with pipe in mouth and with cold blood, 'Everything is foreordained; if we are to go to the bottom, we will go; if not, we will not go.'"¹ The missionaries, in contrast, prayed. Montuori threw a Miraculous Medal into the water and attached another to the ship's mast. They reached Massawa on 13 October.

Though Massawa was not part of the Ethiopian empire, it was the principal port of entry. The Muslim governor received them politely and lodged them in his residence, since they had brought letters of introduction from the viceroy of Egypt. On 15 October, during the rainy season, the caravan, consisting of ten camels with the baggage,

¹Enrico Lucatello-Luigi Betta, *L'abuna Yaqob Maria (S. Giustino De Jacobis)* (Roma: a cura della Postulazione Generale, C.M., 1975), 55-56.

departed for the interior. The passengers traveled on mules, something that was difficult for the Europeans since Ethiopian saddles did not have stirrups but only two rings for the big toe of each foot. They traveled each day from dawn until midday, when the heat compelled them to stop. At the base of Mount Suaira or Taranta they had to abandon the camels and continue on foot. It took three days for them to reach the summit, some 3,000 meters high. From there they were able to see a large area which was probably the great rift valley.

On 29 October they reached the village of Digsä and found Sapeto, together with the d'Abbadie brothers. That same evening Justin de Jacobis reached Adwa, the capital of the province of Tigray. Two days later Montuori joined him. Their first task was to have an interview with the Ras or local king of Tigray, Ras Ubie. Though civil war was endemic in Ethiopia, the country was calm at that time. It was decided that the missionaries would split up. Montuori went to Gonder on 10 December, both to learn the regional language and to seek the best area for missionary activity. Sapeto left for Shewa (Showa) on the same day.

Abuna Salama

The political calm in Ethiopia did not last long. The person who disrupted it and who became the greatest enemy of the Vincentian mission was known as Abuna Salama. A man of murky origins, originally named Andraos, he was Copt by birth but received his early education from English Protestants. He spent four years as a monk in Upper Egypt but was expelled because of his rowdiness, which caused him to lose an eye in a brawl. Through the influence of Protestant friends in Cairo he was named patriarch of Abyssinia, which was subject to Coptic religious authorities in Cairo, while still in his early twenties and had the title of *abun*. An *abun* (abuna before a proper name) was the title of the head of the Ethiopian church, equivalent to metropolitan or bishop. Andraos took the name of Abuna Abba Salama, "The Abun Peaceful Father." He arrived in Adwa in November 1841 and was welcomed by the populace.

He soon showed himself hostile to the Catholics, especially while De Jacobis was on a mission to Europe. Montuori wrote, "From the first day that he set foot in the country he began to threaten and speak against us, showing in an unmistakable way that everything would be

done and set in motion to chase us from the mission."² Salama imposed an interdict on the church of Saint Gabriel in Adwa solely because Sapeto had celebrated mass there three years before. He even had the door walled up so that no one could enter. He excommunicated anyone who embraced Catholicism. The few Ethiopians who were interested in becoming Catholic quickly lost interest and would not acknowledge Montuori.

Montuori decided that nothing was to be done in the province of Tigray. After consulting with Sapeto—De Jacobis was in Europe at the time—he decided to go to Gonder, the capital, and from there to go to Sennaar in the Sudan in order to seek asylum, evade the Abuna's persecution, and not lose the mission altogether by being exiled from the country. A lack of money compelled him to postpone his departure for some months, something that he believed put him in great danger. By selling some cloth and trinkets he made enough money to be able to set out. In the meantime Ubie declared war on Ras Ali, the ruler of Gonder, and together with the Abuna Salama marched on Gonder with an army of 30,000 men. His purpose was to assume rule of the entire country. The presence of the abun, whose power was absolute in both religion and politics, caused many to flock to his standard. However, the attack ended in Ubie's total defeat. He, his sons and nobles, and Salama were all imprisoned.

At Gonder Montuori met the Belgian consul general, Edouard Bondeel van Cuelebroeck,³ a meeting that was to change Montuori's life. Born in Ghent in 1809, Blondeel embarked on a diplomatic career in 1832. He was named consul general at Alexandria, Egypt, in 1837, representing the newly independent nation of Belgium. In 1840 he was given a special mission of a commercial nature to Ethiopia. In 1842, because of uncertain conditions in Ethiopia, he went to Gonder, where he encountered Montuori. Together they left for Sennaar on 22 March 1842.

The entire journey was filled with dangers. Together with a large caravan they crossed from Gallabat to the Blue Nile by way of Gedaret, across more than four hundred kilometers of plains and savannahs parched by the dry season. "While on the road I saw the remains of a lot of people who had been eaten by ferocious beasts . . . We heard the

²Salvatore Pane, C.M., *Il Beato Giustino de Jacobis della Congregazione della Missione* (Naples: Editrice Vincenziana, 1949), 439.

³This was the nineteenth-century spelling, the modern form is Ceulebroeck.

roar of a dozen lions at eighty or a hundred steps from us.”⁴ No person or animal in the caravan was hurt by the beasts, but their proximity caused an accident for Montuori. “The mule that I was riding became so frightened that it paid no attention to the bridle and threw me to the ground. The fall was so violent that my head hurt terribly and my face was livid. In that way I was compelled to continue the journey . . . with head and faced bandaged.”⁵ He was also delirious for a while.

The two stopped at Abu Haraz on the Blue Nile for ten days. From there, apparently, “we stopped traveling by land and set sail on the Nile in a small Arab boat on which after a truly delightful trip of eight days, although occasionally bothered by thousands of crocodiles that are to be seen at every step, we arrived at last in Khartoum, capital of the Sudan and of the entire Sennaar, a kingdom belonging to the famous Mohammed Ali, viceroy of Egypt.”⁶ Montuori was entranced by Khartoum. “There cannot be a more pleasing or interesting spot in every way than that of this city . . . situated on the angle or, better, the confluence of two large and wide rivers, White and Blue [Niles].”⁷ It had a population of some 13,000, of whom only about 200 were Christians, mostly Copts.

Montuori immediately settled down in the city. He purchased a small house “with a nice garden in the best part of the city, with government warehouses to the right and left and in the rear. As a result [I am] alone and isolated on all sides, without having the bother and annoyance of private homes nearby. . . . It is quite large and some days ago I had all different kinds of seeds planted, lettuce, broccoli, radishes, parsley, and turnips. There are thirteen rather nice pomegranate trees, three figs, and one lemon, with a small bower. As soon as I can I will plant many more. There is also a small pool or fishpond that serves for watering. I have had two rather charming little crocodiles put into it.”⁸

Montuori adopted local customs. “When I was in Abyssinia, I dressed according to the Abyssinian fashion, in trousers, shirt, a band

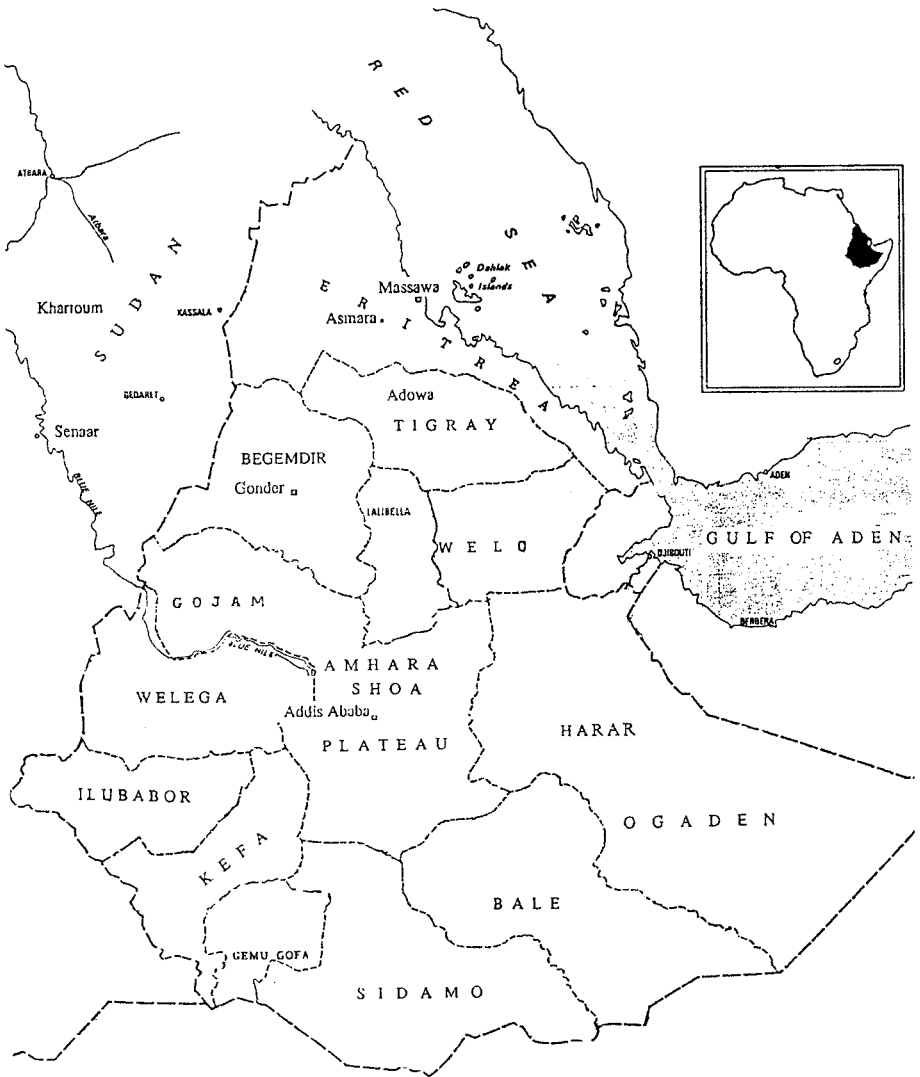
⁴Montuori to superior general, 29 July 1842, in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 9 (1843):300-01.

⁵Quoted in Leonzio Bano, “Lazaristi a Khartum,” *Euntes Docete* 31 (August 1978):290.

⁶Muhammed Ali (1769-1849), who was probably Albanian, rose to power in Egypt and in 1805 was named viceroy. Though nominally subject to the Ottoman Empire, he was in fact independent and established a ruling dynasty.

⁷Montuori to Vincenzo Spaccapietra, 3 September 1843, quoted in Pane, *Il Beato Giustino de Jacobis*, 439-48, and Bano, “Lazaristi,” 291.

⁸Montuori to Spaccapietra, 3 September 1843, quoted in Bano, “Lazaristi,” 292.



Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century

of white cotton round the waist and a cloth round the shoulders, while the feet and head were bare. I follow the custom here: an open caftan [a long robe] tied at the sides, white in color with a pattern of small red flowers. Over this I wear a long, sky-blue, wide-sleeved coat, reaching the ankle. On my head I wear a tarbush or red fez, from which hangs a tassel of blue silk, and on my feet a pair of Morocco leather shoes of Turkish style. When officiating or visiting, I change my tarbush for a white turban."⁹

He also entered into an active ministry among the local Christians, including the Copts and some Greek Orthodox. He undertook a public subscription to build a Christian cemetery on a plot of land donated by the local pasha. Another collection went toward the construction of a Catholic church. He also undertook the education of local children and founded a small school. The pasha showed him great benevolence and the *kadi* (Muslim religious leader of the Sennaar) gave him a suit of oriental clothing made of silk. Montuori was a man full of enthusiasms, and it seems that some of his accounts reflected an exaggerated sense of his successes. In actual fact most of the Christians in Khartoum were involved in the slave trade and regularly cohabited with their female slaves. The children of these unions were usually abandoned or regarded as outcasts.

On 21 March 1843, Count Septime Fay de Latour Maubourg, the French ambassador at Rome, wrote to Cardinal Frasoni that "the Catholic missionaries of Abyssinia, having thought that the establishment of a church in Khartoum would be useful for the success of their mission, have hastened to solicit and have obtained from the viceroy a *firman* [decree] . . . which allows them this foundation."¹⁰ The question, of course, is how a foundation in Khartoum would help the Abyssinian missions? The same ambassador also reported that the French consul in Cairo had had the Coptic religious chiefs write to Abuna Selama to stop his persecution of Catholics.

Blondeel, in the meantime, had returned to Europe and in 1843 was in Rome. On 23 June of that year he wrote a long account of the Abyssinian missions in which he took credit for establishing the mission in Khartoum: "I also believe that I should draw Your Eminence's [Frasoni] attention to the mission that I have established at Khartoum." There certainly must have been some political motive behind his

⁹Ibid., 287.

¹⁰Quoted in Bano, "Lazzaristi," 299.

actions. "I think, for a number of reasons that need no elaboration, that it is necessary to preserve this mission in the Sennaar and, if possible, to send the courageous Signor Montuori a confrere to help him in his evangelical work."¹¹

Montuori also viewed the mission as a permanent Vincentian presence in the city. He asked his superiors in Italy to send two lay brothers to help him. Similarly he asked Propaganda to send another missionary, suggesting Father Calvi in Syria, an accomplished Arabist, as a candidate. On 30 September Father Francesco Ugo, the Vincentian procurator general in Rome, suggested that Father Girolamo Serao and Brother Pergentino Filippini be sent to Khartoum provisionally. "There they could be usefully employed while waiting for orders from the prefect [apostolic], Signor de Jacobis."¹² This latter is significant because De Jacobis had misgivings about what Montuori had done. Despite a number of letters to De Jacobis, Montuori did not hear from him for more than a year.

The two new recruits arrived in mid-1844. Though Brother Filippini was supposed to work on the construction of the new church, Montuori, who often showed impulsiveness, quickly took him to Gonder. Serao was left alone in Khartoum. Bano quotes Father Tappi as saying that Montuori had received letters from some of his confreres, suggesting in jest that he was "timid" for having left Abyssinia. Stella says that Montuori had received letters from De Jacobis and Biancheri suggesting that he had been pusillanimous.¹³

Serao, in the meantime, had to struggle on alone in a strange city. De Jacobis worried about this isolation, for "a solitary missionary is a lost missionary."¹⁴ He hoped that the mission in Khartoum, which did not belong to his prefecture, might be entrusted to the newly established Vincentian house in Alexandria, but that did not occur. After ten months Serao left Khartoum, probably in 1845, on his own initiative and without the permission of his superiors. He made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and then settled at the Vincentian house in Alexandria. His conduct was disapproved by the superior general, Jean-Baptiste Étienne, the Neapolitan provincial, and the superior of Alexandria. After quarreling with the latter Serao determined to leave

¹¹Quoted *ibid.*, 300-01

¹²Quoted *ibid.*, 302.

¹³Salvatore Stella, C.M., *La Congregazione della Missione in Italia dal 1640 al 1835: continuazione dal 1835 al 1874* (Paris: 1884), 145.

¹⁴Quoted in Bano, "Lazzaristi," 303; Pane, *Il Beato Giustino de Jacobis*, 563-64.

the Congregation but after a delay and some second thoughts he returned to Europe in 1846. Again, there are hints that other forces were at work. One writer claimed that he had to leave because of the intrigues of his French confreres, though no evidence was cited.¹⁵ In 1848 a Jesuit named Ryllo, with the approval of the Vincentian superior at Alexandria, went to Khartoum and took over the church and house established by Montuori. Another source says that the house was sold by order of the superior general to pay Serao's debts. Though Serao expressed a willingness to return to Khartoum under certain set conditions, Propaganda refused. In 1847 he left the Congregation of the Mission.

After his return to Gonder in 1844 Montuori conceived the idea of persuading the ras of Showa and the ras of Amhara to ask Rome for a Catholic abun to replace Selama. Montuori differed with De Jacobis over missionary strategy, that is, whether the latter should live openly as a Catholic bishop supported by a ras hostile to Selama or more or less stay underground and avoid all politics. To gain support for the former idea he left for Rome in the summer of 1848, together with a lay brother, Giuseppe Abatini. De Jacobis sent Father Lorenzo Biancheri to Rome to oppose the project.¹⁶ Montuori and his companion sailed from Massawa to Suez, where they organized a small caravan to take them to Cairo. Ordinarily it was a trip of three days, but through the carelessness of the camel drivers the party was exposed to cholera. Brother Abatini contracted the disease and quickly died. The camel drivers wanted to continue the journey immediately, but Montuori bribed them to remain. Montuori, who was also showing symptoms of cholera, persuaded the camel drivers to bury Abatini in the sand. The drivers insisted on continuing the journey, so Montuori had himself tied to a camel, with his face turned toward the ground. He arrived in Cairo half dead but was received with great charity by some local Franciscans, who nursed him back to health. After a month he went to the Vincentian house at Alexandria, where he found Biancheri, who had left two months after him. Together they set sail for Naples, where Montuori tarried briefly while Biancheri went directly to Rome.

¹⁵Eric Schmit, "La presenza dell' Europea nella missione dell' Africa Centrale al metà del secolo XIX," *Euntes Docete* 32 (1969):1-3; 99-127; 23 (1970): 87-110.

¹⁶According to Bano, "Lazzaristi," 308. Lucatello-Betta, on the other hand, state that Biancheri sided with Montuori and also wanted to get the support of foreign governments for the mission (*L'abuna Yaqob Mariam*, 132).

In February 1849 Pope Pius IX, who was in exile in Gaeta because of the revolution of 1848 in Rome, received him in audience.

Montuori was never allowed to return to Africa, in large part because of the opposition of De Jacobis. He returned to the Casa dei Vergini where, despite weak health, he resumed the ministry of preaching and confessions. In 1852 he was named assistant superior of the house. He died there on 8 May 1857, at the age of fifty-nine.

In his journal Justin de Jacobis described Montuori as "the man I have known best and among as many as I have known, the most positive, the most zealous, the most heroic."¹⁷ Sapeto said of him that "there was never a man so pious, honest, simple, and charitable."¹⁸ Montuori was a person of great enthusiasm who apparently underestimated or overlooked often crucial factors in his ministry. His impulsiveness caused him to make quick decisions and embraced causes that were not appropriate. Nevertheless during his nine years in Africa he had faced hardships and perils with the zeal and courage that marked him as a great missionary.

¹⁷Quoted in Bano, "Lazaristi," 288.

¹⁸Quoted in Pane, *Il Beato Giustino de Jacobis*, 147.