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The Sanctuary of St. Justin de Jacobis at Hebo (Eritrea)*

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On 8 August 1853, St. Justin wrote in his Diary:

Last night the “Shoho” goatherds saw those two same lions that were roaring last night near our house walk back and forth, from the rise of the moon until daybreak, around our church at Hebo. All the sheep, the night before, had been put in a safe place. The lions had nothing better to do, it seemed, than to circle the church peacefully. In Ethiopia it is said that lions are accustomed to visit and respect great sanctuaries. Might it someday happen that our church here will become, for these same Moslems who think this way, a great Sanctuary?

A “dream” for the mission of Hebo

If for Justin it was a thought (and perhaps more, given his uncommon gifts!) linked to the popular belief of “lions circling a church,” for the confreres of Hebo it became a “project” that, because of the civil war, was a phantasm, a “dream” very far off, but now becoming real in a wonderful way after decades of waiting, after many sacrifices and worries (some of which are not yet finished).

After St. Justin, the presence of the Vincentians in Eritrea (and Ethiopia) followed the fortunes and the alternating victories and defeats of the Italian occupation of these territories: it was unstable and of little effect. Only after 1945, through the initiative of Bishop Pane, CM, aided by concrete help of Bishop Kidanemariam Kasà, the first bishop of Eritrea and Ethiopia, did the Holy See consent to the presence of the Vincentians of Naples in Hebo, the village which jealously preserves the mortal remains of St. Justin. The important people of the area also gave us the land on which the “Mission” has grown up with its various parts: the House of the Confreres with the Apostolic School, the House of the Daughters of Charity with its Orphanage and Medical Dispensary, the parish Church, a large area where, afterwards, other buildings and works developed: the well, a school (donated by the parish of Santa Maria in Lecce, Italy), the library, the cemetery chapel, and the farms for the needs of the Mission. The final signature of the documents necessary to safeguard the foundation was on 28 July 1948. Legal recognition by the civil authority took place on 21 June 1950.

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Referring to the Church-Sanctuary, Bishop Pane had already hoped (1950) that: “The Church that will rise will be dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the great apostle of Marian devotion in Ethiopia, our Blessed Justin” The cornerstone was laid on 25 June 1961, through the planning of Archbishop Sticchi. The economic difficulties, the war for the liberation of Eritrea, not only made the construction inopportune and impossible at that time, but it forced everyone to rethink the project as it was first conceived (for it was now not in harmony with the place and with the needs for worship). When the 1990s arrived, after a number of different plans, the engineer Fidane Woldeghiorghis (EKIP) drew up a plan that was more responsive to the needs and more in line with oriental and Coptic architecture. Other difficulties still came up while trying to complete this project (in 1998, the war of Bedemè, with all its economic consequences, the scarcity of materials, the problems of transport and manpower; not least of which the crumbling of the bell tower, which happened on 19 April of that year, fortunately without any harm to anyone or any other building).

As a consequence, the projected date for completion during the Great Jubilee of 2000 could not be respected, even though we were able to use the underground part of the structure).

28 July 2002

All the dreams were fulfilled on the above date, (even if, as often happens, being snowed under and with a lot of refinishing left to do at another time), 150 years after the blessing of the little Church of St. Justin at Hebo, where up until now the urn containing his mortal remains was venerated and which now has been moved to the new sanctuary.

The dream became a multicolor image impressed on the eyes of all. There were songs, sounds, important persons representing the central government as well as the various regions, and there were hundreds of pilgrims, full of faith and affection for their most beloved Abuna Jaqob Mariàm. All the bishops of Eritrea, with Archbishop Beniamino De Palma, former Provincial of Naples, concelebrated the Mass with the Bishop of Asmara and blessed and consecrated the temple. Naturally, the vice-Visitor of Eritrea, Fr. Yosief Zeracristos; the Visitor of Naples, Fr. Giuseppe Guerra, CM, was present, as was Fr. Fernández H. de Mendoza, CM, the Vicar General of the Congregation, who represented the Superior General, who was in Toronto for World Youth Day, Fr. Victor Bieler, CM, the Assistant General for the Missions, almost all the confreres of the Vice-Province of Eritrea, and other confreres who came from Italy and Mozambique.

All ready the day before pilgrims had been arriving in an uninterrupted stream, many by foot, sometimes preceded by an ox, which would be slaughtered

for the feast. Hebo, in all its long history, had never seen so many people at one time, praising God both inside and outside the Temple, constructed to fulfill a dream of St. Justin de Jacobis, with the sacrifices and help of so many confreres and benefactors, some of whom already enjoy the eternal reward for their labors. It is difficult to express what people felt in their souls, outside of how they participated in the rite of blessing. It was an extraordinary event for all of us from the West, for it filled our minds with such emotion and admiration. The prayer made was very heartfelt, because in play were peace, justice, well being, progress, stability, and the future of Eritrea!

Heaven, for its part, helped, interrupting the rainy season for a day, even if that water is so precious, because this year the rains came late, threatening both planting and harvesting.

The echoes of the sounds and the songs filled the whole area of Hebo and spread over the mountains and onto the high plains ... for a certain return of blessing and grace for all.

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)