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Epiphany of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**M**AGIS MORI QUAM PECCARE — to die rather than to sin.” This Christian maxim which inspired the martyrs of Uganda—canonized by the Church in 1964—to witness with their own blood, has been inserted in the prayer for their feast. These Christians had been prepared for the supreme testimony to their faith by Father Lourdel, the apostle of Uganda.

Simeon Lourdel was born in Dury, in Pas-de-Calais, France, on December 20, 1853. His father was a farmer; his mother, gentle yet energetic, was graced with great faith. The couple would have five sons. Vigorous and exuberant, Simeon was not enthusiastic about his studies at the minor seminary. Resistant to discipline, he chose the company of the most rebellious students and preferred working in the fields to summer homework. He fervently read stories about faraway missions, and was attracted to the example of missionaries, but the administrators of the minor seminary doubted his vocation. When Simeon arrived two months late for the start of the 1870-1871 school year, having been helping his father with the harvest, he was unceremoniously sent home. Returning home in tears, the child exclaimed, “I want to be a priest! ... They told me I didn’t have a vocation, well—I’ll prove them wrong.” He began to apply himself seriously to his studies and, in October 1872, entered the major seminary in Arras. During his time as a student of philosophy, he began to think of joining the new Society of African Missionaries, just founded by Archbishop Lavigerie of Algiers. At the start of February 1874, he was admitted to its novitiate, in Maison-Carrée, near Algiers.

It was no picnic

On February 2, 1875, driven by a desire for martyrdom, Simeon became a member of the African Missionaries (the “White Fathers”), and was ordained to the priesthood on April 2, 1877. In 1878, Archbishop Lavigerie organized a caravan to take ten missionaries, including Father Lourdel, to central Africa. They left at the end of April. Some explorers, such as Livingstone or Stanley, had proven that the hardships of the journey could be survived. This was no picnic—torrential rains or blazing sun, lack of drinkable water, fevers and other diseases, attacks on the caravan, desertions among the porters, forced marches through scorching deserts or swampy marshes, encounters with caravans of chained slaves including women and many

children. ... At the end of December 1878, the missionaries arrived at the southern tip of the immense Lake Victoria, which they prepared to cross to reach Uganda.

Green hills, cool valleys, and luxuriant vegetation make Uganda a very beautiful country. Its inhabitants, the Baganda, live in huts made of branches. Their crafts are varied—ironwork, pottery, textiles, baskets, mats, and musical instruments. The country was governed by a king with absolute power. He had a great number of pages recruited from among his officers’ children. Polygamy, slavery, and vices were common. Nevertheless, the people were notable for their dignified and polite manner. Respectful of authority and brave, the Baganda were faithful subjects and fearless warriors. The god of the Baganda, Katonda, was worshiped amid other gods whom the sorcerers claimed to represent. The Baganda believed that man did not die entirely at death, but that a spirit was freed from his body. When Islam was introduced into the country in 1852 by merchant caravans, it had undermined the pagan religion in the minds of the elite. In 1875, the English explorer Stanley arrived, followed two years later by Anglican missionaries who were as brave as they were selfless. One of them, Mr. Mackay, settled in Roubaga, the capital, in 1879. The traditional religion maintained an important role in society, but the essential factor for social cohesion was the king, the Kabaka. The best among the king’s subjects were not sure that human sacrifices, arbitrary executions, and polygamy were just; from these points of view, they were open to Christianity.

When the White Fathers arrived, the king of the Baganda was a man named Mutesa. Elegant, proud, and powerful, he was authoritarian and hot-tempered. Intelligent and cunning, he quickly understood that the arriving Europeans (English, Belgians, French, and Germans) would begin to compete among themselves—he would be able to play off their rivalries and negotiate with the highest bidder. In February 1879, the arrival of Father Lourdel and the Brother who accompanied him as advance scouts caused great commotion in

Mutesa's court. However, the king ended up giving them a warm welcome. He gave them lodgings close to the capital and put them under close surveillance. Hearing the Brother who accompanied Father Lourdel call him "*Mon Père*," ("My Father"), the Baganda took this for his name, and from then on called him *Mapéra*. The White Fathers concerned themselves with material development as well as evangelization. Many Baganda came to them for various reasons, but at first, none offered a serious hope for conversion. On the other hand, the prime minister observed with great displeasure the influence exercised by the Fathers, who applied themselves to buying back as many children as possible from the Arab slave traders, receiving them in an orphanage and teaching them the true faith.

The demands of the Gospel

Father Lourdel was to leave a profound mark on Uganda. He spoke with the people in a pleasant manner and, armed with his doctor's bag, gave first aid with a success that ensured him a solid reputation. People were astonished by his courteous manners—one did not expect such cordiality from a man considered superior. One day, King Mutesa announced his desire to become Catholic. Father Lourdel replied that first he would have to renounce polygamy, which the king did not want to do. Archbishop Lavigerie would write, "I believe that it would have been necessary to make a distinction with him, and tell him that he could not become Catholic and receive baptism without first renouncing polygamy, but that he could believe in Our Lord, adore Him, pray to Him, and implore His help in mastering his passions, until they were overcome." It is true, however, that the prelate was never present to observe the king's unforeseeable about-faces.

In 1881, Arab slave traders, whose trade was hampered by the missionaries' presence, persuaded Mutesa to declare Islam the national religion, but Father Lourdel managed to foil this plan. Many Baganda had opted for Catholicism after having tried Islam or Protestantism, and often the latter after the former. They had observed the Fathers at length and carefully listened to their doctrine, and then had decided freely. They made excellent catechists, and Christianity would have spread much more quickly if the leaders had not prevented their servants from learning the religion, and if the missionaries had been able to move freely within the country. Other Baganda came to the Fathers with sometimes mixed motives, but, with the help of grace, their convictions deepened. Following Archbishop Lavigerie's directives, the missionaries only baptized those who had persevered for at least four years in the catechumenate.

The slave traders and the rulers, furious at Mapéra's growing influence, vowed a mortal hatred to the Fathers. For his part, Father Lourdel saw polygamy, practiced by the rich and depriving poor villagers of

wives, as a cause of the rampant homosexuality. The king himself gave himself over to homosexuality and pedophilia. Mapéra taught his catechumens that to give in to the king's desires in this way was condemned by God. Taking a firm position against the king's lusts exposed them to his anger and to death, but these young Christians did not hesitate to refuse to give themselves to the king. They soon formed a group of serious youth, truly committed to putting their daily conduct in line with the teaching they had received, while at the same time serving the king devotedly.

"Mapéra was your friend..."

But at the end of 1882, the king's hesitation in the matter of religion and his fear of the European powers, for whom the White Fathers were considered emissaries, gave rise to a real danger for the Fathers. They decided to leave the mission for a while; on November 20, they set sail for the south of Lake Victoria, leaving behind twenty baptized and more than four hundred forty catechumens. In their absence, the Christians organized themselves under the leadership of the catechists, who were mostly between the ages of 20 and 30. On October 10, 1884, Mutesa died, surrounded by Muslims, the Koran on his chest. His son Mwanga was chosen to succeed him. Friendly, curious, and likeable, he had often visited the Fathers and had demonstrated a great deal of trust in and affection for Father Lourdel. Before leaving, the priest had told him, "As soon as you are king, we will see each other again." Joseph Mukasa, who had become Mwanga's nurse after having been devoted to Mutesa, told the king one day, "My lord the king, Mapéra was your friend."—"That's true," replied the king.—"Don't you want him to come back? The medicines he gave your father were good."—"That too is true—write him to come back."

In mid-July 1885, the Fathers returned. They saw that the Church had grown—the number of Christians had more than doubled. Father Lourdel wrote, "Mwanga is well disposed toward us; he will leave us, I believe, complete freedom to teach. But for himself, he will have trouble practicing. ... He has renounced all the local superstitions. He has the misfortune to smoke hemp, which will leave him dull-witted in a few years. Many of our neophytes have a great influence over him and do him much good with their advice." However, Mwanga was prone to sudden about-faces. Like his father, he showed a tendency toward homosexuality. In the declaration *Persona humana* the Church teaches, "According to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality. In Sacred Scripture they are condemned as a serious depravity and even presented as the sad consequence of rejecting God (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Co 6:10; 1 Tim 1:10). This judgment of Scripture does not of course

permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 29, 1975, no. 8). A fervent Christian, Joseph Mukasa, whose ambition was to live according to Christ’s teachings, tried to turn the king away from lust, drugs, and idolatry. He did not hesitate to remove from the palace the young pages under his care when the king solicited them for homosexual acts. “When the king solicits you for something bad, refuse him!” he told them. This attitude irritated Mwanga, but Joseph exhorted him: “My Lord the king, I beg you, don’t do this anymore! God hates impurity...” Saint Paul, in fact, condemned lust as a vice particularly unworthy of a Christian, and which excludes one from the kingdom of Heaven: *Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals ... will inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor. 6 :9-10).

Ending the plague of AIDS

The virtue of chastity is necessary for behavior that is righteous before God ; it is also the best method of fighting the AIDS epidemic. “Do not be deceived by the empty words of those who ridicule chastity or your capacity for self-control,” said Pope John Paul II to the youth of Uganda, in Kampala, on February 6, 1993. “The strength of your future married love depends on the strength of your present commitment to learning true love, a chastity which includes refraining from all sexual relations outside of marriage. The sexual restraint of chastity is the only safe and virtuous way to put an end to the tragic plague of AIDS which has claimed so many young victims.” This teaching of the Pope is corroborated by a study conducted in Uganda on AIDS prevention. “At the end of the 1980’s, infection with the AIDS virus (HIV) was a terrible problem in Uganda. But in 2003 the prevalence of infection with HIV was estimated at 6% of the total population. This number is still too high but is nothing compared to that of 1990 — 30%, a sad world record — or of the rates in other African countries today... How was this success achieved, and can it be replicated elsewhere? ... In short, the years 1989-1995 saw a dramatic change of sexual habits in Uganda. ... Exposing AIDS for what it is, a fatal disease in 99% of cases, transmitted through sexual intercourse, was enough to bring about a change in the population’s behavior. It must be added that the prevention strategy chosen relied on abstinence and fidelity rather than the promotion of free screening tests and condom use. ... The president of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, was interviewed at the conference in Bangkok (International AIDS Conference, July 2004) to talk about his country’s success in fighting HIV. He did not hesitate to declare that ‘AIDS is primarily a moral, social, and economic

problem. I consider condoms to be an improvisation, not a solution. ... Human relationships must be based on love and trust,’ adding that abstinence was more effective than condoms for fighting HIV. For her part, his wife deplored that ‘distributing condoms to young people amounts to giving them permission to do whatever they want ; and this leads to certain death’ ” (Albert Barrois, “Le Sida, l’Éthique, et l’Experience,” in the magazine *Liberté politique*, no. 27, November 2004).

“The faithful of the present time, and indeed today more than ever, must use the means which have always been recommended by the Church for living a chaste life. These means are : discipline of the senses and the mind, watchfulness and prudence in avoiding occasions of sin, the observance of modesty, moderation in recreation, wholesome pursuits, assiduous prayer and frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Young people especially should earnestly foster devotion to the Immaculate Mother of God” (Declaration *Persona humana*, no. 12).

“Praise” of Christians

On November 15, 1885, Mwanga’s anger at Joseph Mukasa culminated in his condemnation to death. Joseph was beheaded. Seeing that a violent persecution was coming, the catechumens hurried to the Mission to receive Baptism. Charles Lwanga, who was in charge of the large hut where the king held his formal receptions, was a strong athlete, gentle, always ready to serve, and loved by all. His integrity and accuracy had earned him the king’s esteem and trust. His influence over the pages was comparable to Joseph Mukasa’s. But in the first months of 1886, a series of unfortunate events (fires, etc.) had exasperated Mwanga. The slave traders disparaged the Christians : “They do not give themselves over to the pleasures of the flesh. They do not worship gods. They do not like pillage. If you order them to kill someone, they will not do it, yet do not fear being killed themselves. When all your subjects have adopted this way of life, what kind of king will you be?” Mwanga flew into a rage : “I will have them all massacred!” On the morning of May 26, the king called together the executioners and the most powerful leaders. Charles Lwanga immediately gathered together the pages who were still only catechumens and gave them Baptism. Then, with all the Christians, they appeared before the king, who called on them to renounce their faith. When they refused, they were condemned to be burned alive. A number of Christians were martyred during the march to the stake in Namugongo.

The main execution took place on June 3, the feast of the Ascension. The Christians were filled with joy : “One would think that they were going to their wedding!” exclaimed the stupefied executioners. Each Christian was wrapped in reeds and put on the stake, to

which the executioners set fire. Spontaneously, the martyrs recited the *Our Father*. The executioners listened, taken aback. When the martyrs came to the words *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*, the executioners were seized with terror, and screamed with all their might, "It is not we who are killing you! It is our gods who are killing you because you call them demons!" A special fate was reserved for Charles Lwanga. After having witnessed the other Christians' martyrdoms, he was led to a stake set up for him. While the fire devoured his body, the executioner shouted to him, "Go ahead, have God come and pull you from this fire!" He replied, "What you call fire is nothing but cold water. As for you, take care that the God you are insulting does not plunge you one day in the true fire that does not go out." At the moment of his death, he cried out in a loud voice, "O my God!" On June 22, 1934, Pope Pius XI declared Charles Lwanga "patron of African youth." About a hundred Christians received the grace of martyrdom between 1885 and 1887. In 1964, Pope Paul VI canonized twenty-two Catholics for whom there is accurate documentation.

Why this fury?

Father Lourdel thought four main reasons enraged the king against the Christians: (1) the fear that the missionaries, after having taught the people, would take over the country; (2) the observation that his slaves knew more about it than he did; (3) his pages' refusal, after having been taught religion, to go along with his vices; and (4) the fear he and many of the leaders of the country shared of seeing worship of the true God take the place of worship of pagan deities. But the bloody persecution, rather than slowing down the conversions, increased them. In the months that followed, the king's rage subsided, but he remained suspicious of the Whites.

"We are called to pray assiduously for the missions and to cooperate with every means in the Church's activity all over the world to build up the Kingdom of God, 'an eternal and universal Kingdom: a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace' (*Preface for the Feast of Christ the King*). We are called to bear witness first of all with our life to our total adhesion to Christ and to His Gospel. Yes, we must never be ashamed of the Gospel and never be afraid of proclaiming that we are Christians, hiding our faith" (John Paul II, message of May 19, 2002, for World Mission Sunday). Let us ask Father Lourdel to obtain for us the grace to witness joyfully to our faith.

Dom Antoine Marie
O.S.B.

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Profoundly marked by these events, Father Lourdel confided in his brother, a Carthusian monk, about his prayer life and his spiritual trials: "Sometimes I wonder if my faith is failing ... In mission, one realizes that faith is really a gift from God, for oneself as much as for the souls of the converted. ... I have the misfortune of not being a man of prayer. Obtain the grace for me of being able to meditate."

Between September 1888 and February 1890, King Mwanga was dethroned twice, but each time he managed to return to power. The Fathers were also exiled twice. When they returned the second time, they witnessed a veritable rush on the catechumenate. The missionaries had to test the candidates' sincerity, because it had come to be considered fashionable to be on the side of the Christians. At the beginning of May 1890, Father Lourdel fell seriously ill. An inadequate diet, persistent fevers, and all the setbacks he had encountered in his apostolate had destroyed his healthy constitution. On May 11, he asked God's forgiveness for not having served Him better, despite the fact that his entire missionary life had been made up of opposition, exhaustion, danger, and sufferings of all kinds endured to make Christ known and loved. The next day, he breathed his last.

At the time, the mission in Uganda numbered close to 2,200 baptized and about ten thousand fervent catechumens. Soon the seminaries, novitiates, and schools for catechists, that Father Lourdel had prayed for, began to spring up. In 1911, Catholics made up 30% of the population and Anglicans 21%. Christianity had become the main religion, its customs and practices the customs of the Baganda. As for King Mwanga, he was exiled to the Seychelles Islands, where he died in obscurity in 1903, after having finally been baptized by the Anglicans.