

BLESSED VICTOIRE RASOAMANARIVO (1848-1894)



Queen Ranavalona I, reigned over Madagascar from 1828 until her death in 1861. A relentless enemy of the Christian religion, she venerated *sampy* (a type of idol) and performed thousands of superstitious practices for her own protection and for that of her kingdom. Next to the Queen's family, the most powerful clan in the country was the one into which Victoire Rasoamanarivo was born. Her grandfather, Rainiharo, had been Prime Minister to the court for over twenty years. Two of his sons, Raharo and Rainilaiarivony, succeeded him in his duties. Rainiharo had a daughter named Rambahinoro, to whom was born Victoire Rasoamanarivo. She was the third of seven or eight children from the marriage of Rambahinoro to a cousin.

She was born in 1848, a year that seemed to be - as an old Malagasy proverb says - "like the long distance appointment a rooster has with the sun." That year was marked by both the industrial and proletarian revolutions and the reawakening of nationalism.

In this context, Victoire's life would have a profound impact on her society, shaping its destiny and prompting the admiration of those who knew her. In November of 1861, after the death of Queen Ranavalona I, the first Catholic missionaries arrived in Tananarive (today Antananarivo). Victoire was thirteen years old and one of the first students to enroll in a school administered by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Clun. She distinguished herself by her modesty and devotion, and above all, by the care she took to attend Mass with piety and devotion every morning.

She was baptized at age fifteen, on November 1, 1863, and made her First Communion on January 17 of the following year. A few months later, on May 13, she was married to Radriaka, her cousin, the eldest son of Rainilaiarivony. Later, she would insist that at that time she wanted to become a religious sister, but added that "Providence had decided otherwise." Her new vocation, however, did not separate her from the Sisters. She continued to attend the school because the housework was carried out by servants.

Her difficulties began as her parents and their families tried to convert her to Protestantism, which was the state religion and the one most commonly practiced in high society. She was irreproachable and patient. She did not complain but pointed out to her husband the wrong that the families were doing to her dignity as a woman. Her husband, aware of how right she was, sometimes kneeled beside her to pray. She was further burdened by infertility and quietly endured the social stigma that came with it, as many wondered if this was the result of spousal neglect. Rejected by her own, Victoire then began to make the Church her second home. Despite many threats, she would spend seven or eight hours a day there, beginning at 4 o'clock in the morning. She created an oratory in her own house where she frequently spent time on her knees, prolonging her prayers until late evening. Victoire had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin, so the rosary never left her hands. Her intense prayer life, rather than taking her away from her domestic duties, in fact, helped her to fulfill them with total dedication. She looked after her house, which included about thirty servants; she often visited the sick without any class distinction; she gave frequent alms; and she received poor and sick people in her house.

When the lay congregation of the Blessed Virgin was founded in 1876, Victoire was its President, endeavoring to instill in her companions a zeal for charity. She created a workshop for making clothes for the poor and for lepers. She also helped the poor churches, constructing a chapel of the sacred city of Ambohimanga. As a member of the Prime Minister's family, Victoire was a lady of the court. Forced to present herself at the Palace, she went there as a Christian, with her rosary visible in her hand, and prayed before and after lunch. At the sound of the bell, she apologized and took her leave to go aside to recite the Angelus. When she was asked for the reason, she simply replied, "It is the custom of us Catholics." There was no stiffness, ostentation, or bigotry in her, simply faith, fidelity to God, and absolute respect for others.

What most earned the admiration of the royal court was the heroic patience that Victoire demonstrated toward her unworthy husband for nearly three years. She never uttered the slightest complaint against him. However, his behavior was such that the Prime Minister, in agreement with the Queen, tried to arrange for her a separation and divorce from him. When Victoire became aware of their intentions, she begged her father-in-law to renounce the plan because, she said, Catholic marriage is indissoluble.

On May 25, 1883, a persecution broke out against the Catholic mission. All of the French missionaries were expelled and the Catholic faithful were accused of being traitors against the customs of the island, that is, of their homeland. On the very day the missionaries were expelled from Tananarive, an ordinance decreed by an unknown authority and publicized by civil and religious officials, proclaimed that since Catholicism was the religion of the enemies of the homeland, its followers would be considered traitors.

On the Sunday following the exodus of the missionaries, Catholics looked sadly at their closed churches, but did not even dare to approach them. At nine o'clock in the morning, Victoire arrived in front of the Cathedral. Seeing it closed, she sent a message to the Prime Minister asking if the queen had forbidden Catholics from entering the church. There was no such order. Then Victoire, approaching the official at the door, ordered the doors opened. "If you oppose this by force, my blood will be the first you will shed. You have no right to prevent us from entering our churches to pray." The doors were opened. Victoire entered first and many Christians followed her. It was a first victory, a most important one, since it established the principle of freedom of prayer. During the Franco-Malagasy war, the presence of missionaries of French nationality jeopardized the future of Catholicism, since it was seen the religion of the aggressor. Victoire had no prejudices against the French missionaries with whom she had excellent relationships but she wrote abroad to ask that, in view of the local situation, British missionaries be sent instead to Madagascar. But the expulsion was, in fact, applied also to the only English national missionary in the country, demonstrating opposition to Catholicism itself, regardless of the nationality of the missionaries. Father Causseque, a priest of the Cathedral, founded an association of men called "the Catholic Union," which became the instrument Victoire used to maintain faith and the practice of worship throughout the mission.

The members of the Catholic Union reopened chapels, gathered Christians together, and restored schools. It was not easy. Victoire sometimes visited people in the main squares of the town, offering courage by her presence to those who were weak. Some reports of the time describe the expressions of enthusiasm that these visits aroused. "Have confidence," Victoire said. "The Catholic religion is not prohibited. The French left, but religion remains."

When the missionaries finally returned to their posts, Victoire resumed her simple, modest, and humble life. The only thing that still concerned her was her husband's conversion. She prayed and had prayers offered for that intention. Her last work of "spiritual maternity" concerned her husband. One evening, they brought him home drunk, after a fall that would prove fatal. Victoire convinced him to be baptized, which was administered on his deathbed in 1887. She mourned as a widow until her own death, which came seven years later. She had many Masses offered for her husband's soul and took the occasion of her mourning to wear even simpler clothes and to withdraw almost completely from the court. Her most cherished children were the humble: the sick, the poor, the cruelly chained prisoners, lepers tormented continuously by their disease and banished by society.

After a brief illness, Victoire died on August 21, 1894. Two months later, the missionaries were exiled again, until 1895. On her deathbed, Victoire raised her hands to heaven and holding her rosary beads uttered three times, "Mother, mother, mother," and then expired.

She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on April 30, 1989, in Antananarivo. The Catholic Church celebrates her feast on August 21.

VIVIAN UCHECHI OGU (1995-2009)

The striking heroism in the story of Vivian is in the remarkable way in which she expressed her Christian faith, having extraordinary influence on the lives of others from the tender age of nine and the courage with which she put into practice what she had been preaching when the opportunity came at the age of fourteen, opting to be killed rather than to be defiled.

Vivian Uchechi Ogu was born in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria on the 1st of April, 1995, the second of four children of Mr. & Mrs. Peter Ogu. The family was one of the most dedicated at St. Paul's Catholic parish on Airport Road in Benin City, and her father was among those asked to organize the laity of Ascension Catholic Church, a neighboring Mass center at the Nigerian Air Force barracks that was just down the road.



Vivian was baptized at St. Paul Catholic Church, Benin City on July 1, 1995, and she received her First Holy Communion at the same parish on March 21, 2005. She was in the preparatory class for the sacrament of confirmation, which was slated for 2010, at the time of her death.

In academics, Vivian was excellent and she consistently remained at the top of her class from her primary school until her death in secondary school. She combined her academic prowess with a self-determined goal to live an exemplary Christian life, a life she felt would inspire others to greater spirituality and love for humanity so as to give glory to God. Vivian attended the Nigeria Air Force Women Association School for her Kindergarten education. She then attended the Air Force Primary School where she distinguished herself academically. For her secondary education, Vivian attended the Greater Tomorrow Secondary School, also in Benin City. At the time of her death, she was in Senior Secondary II, dreaming and working towards becoming a lawyer so she could fight the cause of the poor and downtrodden, especially widows and orphans or, as she told one of her animators, an aeronautic engineer, so she could prove to the world that it was not just a profession exclusive to the male population.

Vivian represented her school in many activities. She excelled in Mathematics, which was her favorite subject, and represented her school in the local "Cow-Bell Mathematics Competition." For extracurricular activities, Vivian joined an interdenominational group where she held the post of Assistant Prayer leader, a post she held until her death. Her hobbies were, reading, singing, and dancing.

Her spiritual journey received new energy thanks to the Charismatic Catholic Renewal in which she began to participate with her parents. As she grew older, she took part in the Bible study courses of the "Joy Group." She lived out her faith among her friends by exchanging advice and experiences. She was a steward in her class and played prominent role in the yearly Teen Camp meetings which began in 2007. St. Paul's Church encouraged the participation of children and young people in the Sunday Eucharist by offering a special Bible activity for them during the Liturgy of the Word and then having them join their parents for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After Mass, the children received further teachings from the parish catechists. It was here that Vivian, at the age of nine years, began to publicly demonstrate her zeal and courage in speaking to other children on the dignity of purity and virginity. Vivian joined the Sunday School Community as it was known then and later the choir. She was quite young but committed. She took part in all special events in the Church such as the yearly Children Day Celebration, the Annual Children Mission Day and the Christmas Carol Service as well as the end of year thanksgiving where the children are given the responsibility of organizing liturgical activities for the day. She took part in almost all the activities in the parish community as much as her age then would allow. For liturgical celebrations, she would always take either the reading or prayer of the faithful.

After joining the children's choir in the parish her family started attending in 2005, Vivian found that the choir director was frequently absent from its practices and activities, and soon she had informally assumed the role of choir leader. She wanted so much to organize a skillful and disciplined choir that she developed, with her father's help, a formal statute instituting it. The proposal was approved by the parish council and thus the children's choir was officially established in the parish for the first time.

Over the next four years, under Vivian's guidance, the choir grew from a small group of about twenty children to nearly sixty children at the time of her death. This choir frequently won first place in the various musical competitions organized by the Society of Holy Childhood, from 2007 right up to the most recent ones. With her deep conviction and love for God and her companions, Vivian proposed the idea of periodic sacrifice. She encouraged the children to engage in various acts of mortification for salvation, for their personal conversion, and for the material and spiritual needs of the neediest children in the parish and the world.

It is therefore not surprising that when the Pontifical Association of the Holy Childhood (PAHC) was inaugurated in the parish of St. Paul in 2006, Vivian was unanimously elected as the first president. During her tenure, she worked tirelessly to make the parish's PAHC chapter second to none in the archdiocese in terms of carrying out works and prayers. Among the projects that she coordinated there was, on the occasion of Children's Day in 2008, the collection of funds to cover the medical expenses of some disabled children at the Central Hospital of Benin City, and also to meet the needs of some children from the orphanages in Benin City. Two institutions that benefited from this generosity were the orphanages in Edo and Oronsaye.

For Children's Day 2009, Vivian mobilized the entire parish to establish a solidarity fund for the less fortunate parishioners. Vivian was the official representative of the parish during the meetings and activities of PAHC in the archdiocese. She was also the first member of to contribute to the creation and circulation of the archdiocesan PAHC newsletter, called "Friends of Jesus." Vivian loved reading the Holy Scriptures and asking for explanations from her priests and teachers concerning the teachings of the Church. Moved by her love for the Word of God, she had decided to commit herself to writing her understanding of the Gospels. She had arrived at chapter sixteen of the Gospel of St. Matthew by the time she was killed.

Through the archdiocesan training courses organized for children by the PAHC, Vivian became aware of the story of Saint Maria Goretti. She would continually retell the story of her favorite saint when she invited his companions to a life of faith and friendship with Jesus and instructed them on the value of virginity. With her heroic death, Vivian offered a concrete example of this teaching.

On Sunday, November 15, 2009, while she was at home in the evening, armed thieves came and robbed her family and then took Vivian and her sister out of town to a rural area. The thieves tried to rape her, but when she vigorously refused, they shot and killed her. On November 27, 2009, after the Mass of Christian Burial in St. Paul's Church, her body was transported to her hometown of Aboh Mbaise for burial. Having learned the news of her heroic death, the government of Edo State granted the land where she was martyred to the Archdiocese of Benin City. Two years later, the local government council of Ikpoba Okha officially named the road on which she was killed, "Vivian Ogu".

Since 2010, the faithful of the Archdiocese of Benin City gather every year on November 15 at the place she was killed for an annual memorial of Vivian Ogu. On March 29, 2014, the Archbishop of Benin City, Augustine Obiora Akubeze, inaugurated the Vivian Ogu Society, with the task of making known the story of her exemplary life, preserving the land where she was killed, collecting testimonies of people about her virtues and about potential miracles, for the promotion of the cause for her possible beatification.

WANDA BŁEŃSKA (1911-2014)

Wanda Maria Błęńska was born to Teofil Błęński and Helena Brunsz on October 30, 1911, in Poznań, Poland. On December 9 of the same year, she was baptized in the parish of St. Martin, also in Poznań.

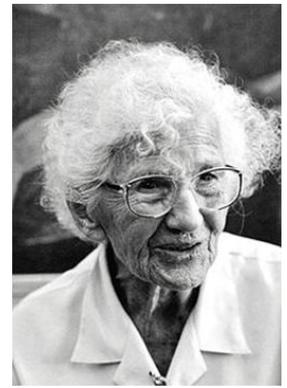
Because Wanda's mother fell ill, the family moved to Puszczykowo, but Helena's condition did not improve. At only fifteen months old, little Wanda became motherless. In 1920, with her father and her brother Roman, she moved again, this time to Toruń. There she made her First Communion and attended the girls' high school. In 1928, she graduated, receiving a high school diploma and then took the first step to realize her dream, returning to Poznań to study at the School of Medicine. Although she had to wait several years to go on a mission, during her studies, she worked sedulously in missionary organizations both in Poznań and at the national level. Initially she was part of a missionary group with the Marian Sodality Movement, where the idea of founding a Missionary Academic Circle was born.

On January 20, 1927, in the main hall of the University of Poznań and in the presence of Cardinal August Hlond, the Primate of Poland, the first Missionary Academic Circle was inaugurated. At that time about 150 people were involved. Soon, groups of this kind were established at the Universities of Krakow, Leopold, Lublin, Warsaw, and Vilnius. Today, the Poznań Missionary Academic Circle, reactivated in 2002, bears the name of Wanda Błęńska and sends young people each year for missionary experiences.

Wanda actively participated in the organization of the International Congress of Missionary Academic Circles held in Poznań from September 28 - October 2, 1927, which was boasted the participation of over two thousand people. At that time, the Association of Academic Mission Societies in Poland was founded and Wanda was appointed to the Central Council. For years she participated in national and international missionary conferences. In 1931, she became a member of the board of directors of the Poznań missionary group. She also participated in the editorial board of *Annales Missiologicae*, the first missionary journal in Poland, which, after the interruption of the war, resumed its publication under the new title of *Annales Missiologicae Posnanienses*. In 1932, Wanda received a diploma from Pope Pius XI to encourage the spread of the work of the Pontifical Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Wanda graduated with a medical degree on June 20, 1934. After finishing her studies, she returned to Toruń, where she first worked in the municipal hospital, and then, until the end of the war, at the National Institute of Hygiene. In 1942, she entered the ranks of the secret military organization Gryf Pomorski, later incorporated into the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), the main resistance movement in Nazi occupied Poland. In 1978, she was awarded the Military Cross of the Home Army. On June 23, 1944, her name day, Wanda was arrested for her conspiratorial activity. In prison, she was sentenced to death, but in the end, after more than two months in prison, she was released.

After the war, she took over the management of a hospital in Toruń and worked in the Hygiene Department in Gdańsk. In 1946, she decided to go to her dying brother, Roman, who was living in Germany. Not having received her passport, she traveled clandestinely in the coal storage of a ship destined for Lubeck and was able to join her ailing brother. After his death, she was not allowed to return to Poland and remained in Germany, where she worked in Polish military hospitals. In 1947, she attended a tropical medicine course in Hamburg. She then moved to England, where she continued her education in the field of tropical medicine and was admitted to the Royal Association of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in London. There she met a missionary priest member of the Congregation of the White Fathers, who told her about plans to build a leper colony in Fort Portal, Uganda. In 1950, Dr. Błęńska received an invitation to work in Uganda from the local bishop, and in March of the same year began her service at the Fort Portal hospital. Unfortunately, however, the leper colony was never built.



The hospitals of Nyenga and Buluba, built in the 1930s by Mother Kevin, foundress of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa, were the first centers for the treatment of leprosy in Uganda. For years only nurses and laboratory technicians worked there because there were no doctors. On April 24, 1951, Błęńska arrived in Buluba, on Lake Victoria, and began her work in St. Francis Hospital, where she remained for another forty years as a doctor and lay missionary. At the beginning, the working conditions were deplorable, but Wanda modernized both institutions, bringing them to a high level of treatment and patient care. In 1956, she founded a training center for medical assistants for the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy, which today bears her name. She taught many students in several African countries, participated in the International Congress of Doctors on Leprosy and became one of the most qualified specialists in the world in the treatment of this disease.

In the early eighties, Dr. Błęńska entrusted the management of the center in Buluba to her pupil, Dr. Joseph Kawumie, though she remained there working as a medical advisor until 1992. In 1986, she went with Father Marian Żelazek to India, where for nine months she worked in a center for lepers in Puri. The two Polish missionaries were united by a sincere friendship for many years. Wanda Błęńska won the hearts of the people of Uganda not only through her professional skills but also through her compassionate approach to the sick. She was called the Mother of the Lepers. Thanks to her work, she helped overcome the social stigma against those struck with Hansen's disease and took many actions to restore their dignity. She examined them without gloves, unless a wound was open or when she was operating, because she did not want them to feel disrespected. Years later, she recounted, "First of all, I wanted to get my patients accustomed and familiar with their illness to lessen their fear. As with any disease, even with leprosy, one must become familiar. These patients are poor. There are always many people who make them feel afraid. Sometimes when an atmosphere of fear is created, it spreads, it is contagious. I always said to everyone, 'Look at me, are my fingers infected?' Obviously, I kept the usual hygienic principles. After examining a patient, I washed my hands. But I washed them not only after examining someone with leprosy, but after each patient, so that everyone could see that this gesture belongs to the habits of every doctor."

Wanda Błęńska returned to Poland in 1992, but for two years she traveled between her two countries (Poland and Uganda). She re-settled permanently in Poznań in 1994. She went to Uganda for the last time in 2006. Despite her advanced age, she participated in the missionary life of the Church until the end of her life. Until the age of 93 she taught at the Warsaw Missionary Training Center. On June 7, 2003, the Institute for Lay Missionaries of the Polish Episcopal Conference was named in honor of her. For many years she visited schools, parishes, pastoral centers, and missionary groups, particularly inspiring children and adolescents. "When I talk to young people," she said, "I always say: if you have some good and bright idea, cultivate it! Do not let it fall asleep, do not refuse it! Even if it seems impossible to reach and too difficult, do not be discouraged. You must cultivate your dreams!"

In addition to attending missionary conferences and conventions, Wanda organized medical and financial assistance for missionaries and missions, even with her own money. She was part of the group of organizers of the *Redemptoris Missio Humanitarian Aid Foundation* and was an honorary member of the foundation's Council. A private school in Poznań and a school complex in Niepruszew both bear her name. She received numerous awards and honors, including the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Cross, the *San Silvestro* Medal, the *Order of Poland* (which she later decided to return), honorary citizenship of Uganda, the title of Doctor *Honoris Causa* from the Academy of Medical Sciences in Poznan, and, from children, the *Order of Smiles*.

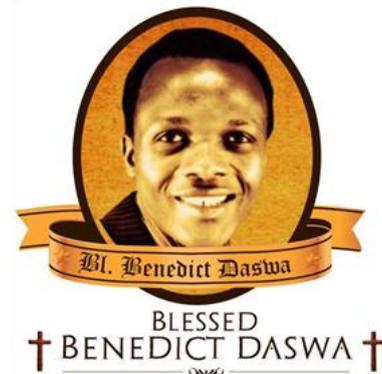
Wanda Błęńska died in Poznan on November 27, 2014, at the age of 103.

Currently, the Archdiocese of Poznan is gathering all the material concerning the life and WANDA BŁEŃSKA (1911-2014)

BLESSED BENEDICT DASWA (1946-1990)

Pope Francis, in his decree of beatification, described Benedict as a “diligent catechist, a thoughtful teacher, a witness of the Gospel to the point of shedding his own blood.”

Tshimangadzo Samuel Daswa was born on June 16, 1946, in the village of Mbahe in the province of Limpopo, South Africa, in what is now the Diocese of Tzaneen. He died a martyr for the faith on February 2, 1990, and was beatified on September 13, 2015.



When Benedict became a Catholic, he understood that there were aspects of African culture, such as the widespread practice of witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which he could no longer accept. His position against these profound and obscure problems of his culture led him to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. His brutal death by stoning and beating has made him a hero to all Christians in Africa and to all those throughout the world who struggle to be free from the slavery of sorcery. Benedict Daswa lived his Christian vocation with contentment and enthusiasm, but at the same time with modesty and humility, as shown by his Christian witness in various areas of his life. After his baptism, and especially after getting married in the Church to Shadi Eveline Monyai in 1974, Benedict became a guide for the young and spent many hours and weekends with them to catechize and teach them.

When the first pastoral council was formed in his parish, he was elected its president. He helped teach catechism to children and adults, leading the Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, visiting the sick and the non-practicing, and helping the poor and needy. In church, he helped start a nursery school. Every once in a while the small Christian community gathered at his home and during these meetings the Rosary was recited and the Word of God was shared.

In the family, Benedict was a model husband and father, totally devoted to ideal of the family being a “domestic church.” In the classroom, he was not only concerned with providing students with a good level of education, but above all instilling in them fundamental moral values so as to form their personalities. Being a skilled and motivated sportsman, Benedict imparted to young people the value of hard work, discipline, fairness, and team spirit. As principal of the school, he was respected and scrupulous, and he motivated and trained his staff to provide the best possible education to the students, involving the parents as collaborators in the entire educational process.

In the public sphere, Benedict made no secret of his position against witchcraft, magic, and ritual murder, which still have the power to prevent the development and progress of a society. Witchcraft allegations are often driven by jealousy, fear, and suspicion towards those who appear to be more engaged and successful in their undertakings. Benedict realized the need to free individuals from these paralyzing effects, allowing them to take personal responsibility for their lives and become mature adults.

This is why his role in helping people achieve true inner freedom was important not only for the Church, but for the whole of society. Both in the local community as a counselor and advisor to the village chief, and in the ecclesial community as a catechist and prayer guide, Benedict demonstrated a spirit of genuine Christian love, respect, generosity, honesty, and freedom. But above all, and in every situation, Benedict was a man of prayer whose spiritual life was constantly nourished by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and the Word of God. This great mystery of faith and love meant everything to him. It was the center of his life.

He was never ashamed to admit his great faith in God for it was God who gave him strength. People who knew him very well testified that the growth in his relationship with God was clearly visible, as was the fidelity with which he lived the values he had embraced at his baptism. He wanted Catholics to be proud of their faith and to assume a real responsibility towards the Church

he loved so much. This meant working at the local level for priestly vocations and religious life, being active in the Church and supporting her financially.

His position against witchcraft was not very popular, because he was opposed to something rooted in local culture. There were others who, like Benedict, considered the world of witchcraft as the fruit of evil, fear, mistrust, enmity, injustice, and violence, which they thought people should abandon and free themselves from. But most of them, including religious ministers, were silent for fear of reprisals. Benedict was different. He spoke openly and forcefully in public, opposing those who resorted to witchcraft. Benedict Daswa never compromised. He always adhered to his Christian faith. He defended those who refused to pay to consult the *sangoma* (the shaman), because he did not want people to pay for something that was false. Above all, Benedict did not want any innocent man to be killed or banished from the village as an alleged sorcerer. What normally happened is that through rumors and gossip, a finger was pointed at someone, often an elderly woman or some other vulnerable person. People didn't seek any proof of guilt, but turned to a *sangoma* who usually confirmed their suspicions. The one accused had no opportunity for defense.

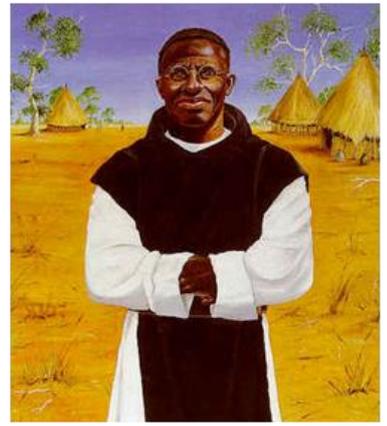
Between November 1989 and January 1990, flooding struck the village where Benedict lived with his family. On January 25, 1990, during a storm, the roofs of some huts were struck by lightning and caught fire. It was widely believed that when lightning struck a house, it was caused by a person who was a sorcerer. According to traditional culture, sorcerers had to be captured and killed, as well as anyone who protected them, because they posed a threat to society. This was traditional culture. Benedict was aware of the growing pressure against him. So the following Sunday, the village leader called a council meeting to address the issue. Benedict had not yet arrived when it was decided that some members of the community would have to consult a *sangoma* in order to find the sorcerer who had sent the lightning. But first they would have to raise the money needed to pay for it. When Benedict arrived, he immediately tried to change their minds, pointing out that their decision would lead to the death of innocent people. The meeting ended with their firm resolve and Benedict's refusal to collaborate. His enemies gathered a group of young people and adults to kill him. Friday, February 2, 1990, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, became a feast day for Benedict Daswa's entry into paradise.

The most significant aspect of Benedict's witness has to do with his ability to critically embrace what was good in his culture, but to bravely challenge the cultural elements that hindered the realization of life to the fullest. Benedict firmly believed that marriage was a relationship of partners for life, a faithful sharing of life and love. In a rural, patriarchal, and traditional African community in apartheid-era South Africa, Benedict gave a prophetic witness to a respectful attitude towards women's equal dignity. He believed in a faithful and monogamous marriage that finds its full meaning in the Christian sacrament. As testified by his sons, he was never ashamed to help Eveline, his wife, in household chores that were generally reserved to women. He prayed every day with his family and encouraged all parents to pray with their children. He organized regular family reunions and acted as a mediator and counselor for couples in difficulty. And finally, Benedict was a fervent teacher and educator, becoming the principal of the Nweli Primary School where he taught for many years. And perhaps above all, as pointed out by those who knew him, he was a profoundly humble man, who always used the power of confrontation and dialogue that came to him from his faith and friendship with Jesus.

He never renounced his African culture, but embraced its best aspects, purified and matured by faith. His story reflects his sincere commitment to the values of Ubuntu ethics, a commitment to the common good and the service of life. The example he offered through his daily life – as a lay person, a family man, a diligent catechist, and a thoughtful teacher – is what many South Africans today consider the most significant legacy of his life: not against their culture, but for the good of their culture and that of every culture and nation.

BLESSED CYPRIAN MICHAEL IWENE TANSI (1903-1964)

Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, the first blessed of Nigeria, was born in 1903 in Igboezunu, on the edge of the forest, near the ancient city of Aguleri in southern Nigeria, located in what is now the Diocese of Onitsha. Only a few years before, in 1890, the Alsatian Catholic missionaries had brought the first announcement of the faith to the region; they were soon followed by Irish missionaries who belonged to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. His parents, peasants, were pagans who practiced the traditional religion of the Igbo people. In 1909, at only six years old, little Iwene was sent by his parents to the town of Aguleri. There, in the Christian neighborhood called Nduka, he lived in the house of a maternal aunt whose son, Robert Orekie, a Christian, was a teacher in the mission school. At the age of nine, he was baptized and was given the name of Michael. His peers described him as a studious boy who demanded very much of himself. He had a strong influence on his companions, who were fascinated by his decisive and precocious personality, both on human and religious levels, and by his profound piety.



In 1913, Michael moved to Onitsha, where he enrolled in Holy Trinity Primary School and in 1919, he obtained the diploma that enabled him to teach. In 1924, he assumed the post of principal of St. Joseph School. He felt the call of God to the priestly life, and in 1925, at the age of 22, resolutely overcoming the opposition of family members, entered the newly established St. Paul Seminary in Igbariam, becoming the first indigenous vocation of the area. By 1932, the confidence he had inspired in his superiors was so great that he was entrusted with the role of treasurer of the Training College. On December 19, 1937, he was ordained a priest by the missionary Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. in the Cathedral of Onitsha. Michael demonstrated his exceptional gifts throughout the first twelve years of his priesthood, which has been confirmed by the many testimonies of those who witnessed his zeal and his complete abandonment to God.

Michael's first assignment was in the parish of Nnewi. Elisabeth Isichei, in her precious book *Totally for God: The Life of Michael Iwene Tansi*, summarizes his strongest pastoral characteristics: "personal asceticism, great capacity for commitment and physical resistance, goodness towards the sick and the poor, concern for the sanctity of marriage and the spiritual formation of women, as well as personal charisma." In 1940, he bravely managed to dispel a superstitious myth about land that had been given to the missionaries, which was known as "the cursed forest." It was expected that anyone who entered would die or otherwise contract some kind of terrible disease. The first thing that Fr. Michael did was travel through the forest, sprinkling it with holy water. When he emerged unscathed, the people took courage and cut down the forest. The next step was to build a church and a school, a rectory and houses of welcome. They were rudimentary buildings, but he helped build them himself, offering a concrete example of being a tireless worker. Seeing a priest working so hard prompted many people to help him, and his example inspired others to undertake similar endeavors throughout the region.

As for women, he cared about their dignity and put forth much effort to protect their virginity. To do so, he organized houses in his parishes which accommodated young women so as to prepare them for marriage and to deter them from living with their future husband before marriage. The Legions of Mary that he established assisted him in every village of the parish by informing him of sick people who wanted to be baptized, promoting the morality of the inhabitants, and preparing the catechumens. He committed himself to the building of schools and to making sure that there were qualified teachers. He built houses in which to welcome the oldest students, one for boys and one for girls. He attended to a good number of orphans, and he made sure that each of them received a suitable education. Fr. Michael seemed to have a special gift to encourage priestly

vocations; at least seventy priests came from his parishes. He was a good preacher. People were touched by what he said and remembered his teaching. He was critical of some pagan customs and superstitions and, even when he could not completely eradicate them, he still managed to weaken their hold on his parishioners.

Amid the whirlwind of pastoral activities, he perceived the beauty of the contemplative life. During a retreat day with the clergy, Archbishop Charles Heerey expressed the wish that a few of his priests embrace a monastic experience, in order to bring the seed of contemplative life into the diocese. Father Tansi, without hesitating, declared himself ready to put his bishop's proposal into action, along with the assistant priest at his parish, Fr. Clement Ulogu. In July 1949, contacts were made with the Cistercian Abbey of Mount Saint Bernard in Leicester, England, which agreed to welcome the two priests. Michael arrived at Mount Saint Bernard on July 3, 1950, accompanied by Archbishop Heerey. Under the action of the Spirit, the man who had been an authentic pioneer and "manager" in the young missionary church of the diocese of Onitsha made himself a humble and docile monk in his new way of life. He embraced the austerity and silence of everyday Trappist life, where no one except the novice master, Fr. Gregory Wareing, had any idea of the magnificent work he had done as a priest. One of the memories shared by those who knew him at Mount Saint Bernard is the image of him praying in the chapel of the Madonna, with his head bent to one side, as if he were listening to his Lord speaking to him.

The original idea with which the two Nigerians had entered the community was to receive formation in monastic life, with the aim of then bringing it to Nigeria, but the difficulty of making a foundation with only two people soon became clear. Eventually they freely asked to be admitted to profession at Mount Saint Bernard and to wait until the community was able to send a group. In 1963, the monastic community decided to establish a foundation in Africa, but in Cameroon rather than Nigeria. This disappointed Fr. Michael, but he accepted it as God's will.

When the group for the foundation in Cameroon was appointed, Fr. Michael was chosen as the novice master, because he seemed to be the right person to form the future African vocations. The first four founders left Mount Saint Bernard on October 28, 1963, to prepare the buildings for the rest of the group's arrival, scheduled for the spring of the following year.

But God's plan for Fr. Michael was different, and it was made manifest in a very short time. In January 1964, he was struck with acute pain in one of his legs, which swelled enormously. The doctor diagnosed thrombosis and proposed hospitalization. Urgently admitted to the Royal Infirmary in Leicester, he was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm. During the night he got worse, and on the morning of January 20, 1964, in a spirit of total poverty and detachment, Fr. Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi took the last step of his long journey of faith and love in silence.

On January 22, 1986, twenty-two years after his death, with great solemnity before a gathering of faithful from all parts of Nigeria, the process of his canonization was opened in the Cathedral of Onitsha. By that time, a few monastic communities of contemplative life had already begun to flourish in the area. The remains of Fr. Michael were exhumed in 1988 and returned to Onitsha. During the reburial Mass, a miracle occurred when the bishop allowed seventeen-year-old Philomina Emeka, who had been suffering from inoperable tumors, to approach and touch Fr. Michael's coffin, and she was immediately healed.

The miracle led to his beatification celebrated by Pope St. John Paul II on March 22, 1998.

BLESSED LUCIEN BOTOVASOA (1908-1947)

Lucien Botovasoa was born in 1908 in Vohipeno, a small village in the Diocese of Farafangana, on the southeastern coast of Madagascar, more than one thousand kilometers from the nation's capital.

His parents were poor farmers, like many others in this region, always struggling with weather-related risks. They followed the traditional religion but were open-minded. When the villagers discovered the Christian faith, many converted and asked for baptism. Among them was Lucien, baptized at the age of 13 on Holy Saturday, April 15, 1922. His parents converted to the Christian faith much later. Lucien was confirmed the following year, April 2, 1923. From his childhood, Lucien was intent on living his faith with commitment and seriousness.



Lucien's ideal of life was to be a good Christian, an apostle of Jesus in the heart of the world. What most characterized his martyrdom was his love for his compatriots and his persecutors. It is no coincidence that he was called Rabefihavanana, the Reconciler.

Following the motto of the Jesuit Fathers, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, Lucien studied in Ambzontany Fianarantsoa, at Saint Joseph College, for four years. After he obtained a teacher's diploma, he returned to Vohipeno as teacher and assistant director of the parish school. Even then, he still had the desire to read and continue to learn everything. He was a wonderful educator and an exceptional, competent, conscientious, and zealous teacher, explaining all the school subjects to his students with clarity and kindness. But he was also a Christian teacher and always concerned himself with the religious education of children, to whom he taught catechism both during school hours and after classes. Every evening, after school, he read the stories of the saints to those who wanted to hear them. But what he loved most of all were the lives of the martyrs; he knew how to tell them with a very particular fervor that set fire to the hearts of those who listened.

On October 10, 1930, Lucien married Suzanne Soazana. The couple had eight children, of whom only five survived. Lucien loved his children, educated them, and taught them to pray. But he also spent a great deal of time taking care of the children of others, visiting the sick, teaching in the evening, leading various groups – the Crusaders of the Heart of Jesus, the Honor Guard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Young Malagasy Catholics – to learn the catechism. Suzanne, at home, had a great challenge: she wanted her husband to leave the role of teacher to become an accountant. Lucien, however, continued his service of forming others in the Christian life with joy and generosity. He spent much time at church, playing the harmonium and conducting the choir, not only during Sunday Mass, but also weekdays at the early morning six o'clock Mass.

Around 1940, looking for a book on the life of a married saint to be taken as a model, Lucien discovered the Franciscan Third Order (since 1978, called the Secular Franciscan Order) and studied the Rule. With Marguerite Kembarakala, who had formed him to the faith, he established a first community of brothers in Vohipeno. The rule was demanding, and Lucien applied it to the letter. Lucien Botovasoa began to excel in piety and poverty. Every night he got up several times to pray kneeling at the foot of the bed, then he went to church at six for an hour of meditation before the tabernacle. On Wednesdays and Fridays, he enlivened the family meal but, following the rule, he fasted himself, provoking Suzanne's discontent.

In October 1945 and then in June 1946, political elections were held in Madagascar. The two political parties wanted Lucien Botovasoa as their candidate. But Lucien categorically refused their invitation, insisting, "Your politics are nourished by lies and can only end in blood."

Sunday, March 30, 1947, Palm Sunday, Lucien's father sent Lucien and his brother into the forest. The two took refuge there as insurgents attacked the city. The fighting lasted until Wednesday.

The massacres carried out by the political party known as the Parti des desherites de Madagascar resulted in a bloody Holy Week. The result was a total massacre, with eighteen churches and five schools burned. Naturally, on Easter, it was not possible to celebrate the Eucharist in the parish church. On the Second Sunday of Easter, Lucien returned to the city after having taken his family to safety in the forest. Here he succeeded in bringing all the refugees together in a common prayer, in which Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims participated. Lucien commented on the Gospel, urging everyone to revive their faith and to have the courage to face martyrdom in the event that it was necessary. He spoke and led the song with intense joy.

On April 16, 1947, King Tsिमihono, the local leader of the Malagasy Democratic Renewal Movement (MDRM), summoned everyone to eliminate all the party's enemies from the city, including Lucien. On Thursday, April 17, the king offered a key position to Lucien Botovasoa, inviting him to become the secretary of the MDRM. Meanwhile Lucien had communicated to his wife that they would condemn him. Suzanne wanted him to hide, but Lucien refused and, taking a picture of St. Francis from the wall, said, "He will guide me."

After a quiet lunch with his family and some prayer, Lucien replied to those who had come to arrest him without the slightest hesitation, "*I am ready.*" He was taken without the least resistance. He knew he would die and when they called him, he came forward. Sitting at the king's right hand, in the place of honor, he said aloud, "I know you are going to kill me, and I cannot fight it. If my life can save others, do not hesitate to kill me. The only thing I ask of you is not to touch my brothers."

If he had accepted the role as MDRM secretary, he would have saved his life. But he said, "You kill, you burn the churches, you forbid prayer, you let the crucifixes be trampled, and you destroy the sacred images, rosaries, and the scapulars. You want to desecrate our church, turning it into a ballroom. Yours is a dirty work. You know how important religion is to me. I cannot work for you." About thirty boys from Ambohimananarivo, mostly his old students, accompanied him to the Mattatoio, the place where executions took place, at the south exit of the city, in a place called Ambalafary. Lucien said, "Tell my family not to cry, because I am happy. It is God who takes me. May your hearts never abandon God!" He walked like a free man, a conqueror. The group of boys arrived at the place of execution. Three men designated by the king were already in place. To reach them, the procession had to cross a canal. Before crossing it, Lucien asked for time to pray and was given it. He prayed, "O my God, forgive my brothers, who now have a difficult task to face. May my blood be shed for the salvation of my country!"

Lucien repeated these words several times. He also prayed in Latin, and perhaps intoned the song of Lent that he loved so much: "Save, O Lord, save your people, may your wrath not remain forever upon us!" Then they wanted to tie his hands, but he refused, saying, "Do not bind me to kill me. I bind myself." And he crossed his wrists one on top of the other, holding the cross of the rosary in his hand. Once on his knees, he prayed again, repeating the words already spoken before: "O my God, forgive my brothers." He forgave the executioners first and interceded for them, while they mocked him: "Your prayer is too long! Do you think it will save you?" Some of those who had remained on the other side of the canal were shouting insults. But Lucien answered, "I have not finished! Leave me a moment longer." He raised his hands to heaven and prostrated himself three times on the ground, like Jesus during the Passion, then turned to them saying, "Hurry up now, because the spirit is ready but the flesh is weak."

While they killed him, the executioners mocked him, saying, "Now go play your harmonium." Given up for love of Christ and his Church, Lucien's body was thrown into the Matitanana River. Recognizing his martyrdom and his witness to his faith, the Catholic Church beatified him on April 15, 2018, in Vohipeno, Madagascar.

BLESSED PIERRE CLAVERIE (1938-1996)



In January 2018, Pope Francis approved the beatification of Bishop Pierre Claverie and his eighteen companions. The murder of Pierre Claverie, a Dominican and the Bishop of Oran in Algeria, was the latest in a series of tragic killings that cast the Church of Algeria into grief between 1994 and 1996. The other victims were seven Trappist monks, four missionaries of Africa, a Marist friar, and a number of religious belonging to different congregations. Their deaths are inscribed in a dark decade during which between 150,000 and 200,000 people were killed due to religious violence and repression. It was precisely their free choice not to flee this violence for the love of Christ and the Church, which allows us to call these Christians “martyrs.”

Pierre Claverie was born in Algiers in 1938. He was a native son of colonial Algeria. In adulthood he confessed that he had lived all his youth among the Arabs without ever meeting them: “I lived my childhood in Algiers in one neighborhood of this cosmopolitan Mediterranean city. Unlike other Europeans, born in the countryside or in small cities, I never had Arab friends. We were not racist, just indifferent. We ignored the majority of the population of this country. The Arabs were part of the landscape of our outings, the background of our encounters and our lives. They were never companions.... I had to listen to numerous sermons about love of others, because I was a Christian and also a scout, but I never realized that even the Arabs were my neighbor. A war was needed for that bubble to burst,” he explained much later, recognizing that he had lived all his youth in a “colonial bubble.” This awareness, which corresponded to the outbreak of war in Algeria and its proclamation of independence, constituted for him a real watershed, which led him, in 1958, to religious life in the Dominican order. Pierre studied in Le Saulchoir, where his teachers were the great Dominican theologians whose work helped frame the ecclesiology proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council: Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and Andre Liege. He graduated in 1967 with a solid intellectual and spiritual formation, which served him well later on. In the letters he wrote to his family, his precocious intellectual maturity shines through: “This morning, during prayer, I finally discovered the Triune God, who has always seemed to me to be simply a theological argument. I believe that it is the essence of Christianity – beyond the life of Jesus, his teaching, his Church, he reveals God to us, not only as a Father God, but giving us the image of what we are called to be: those who participate in a current of love that unites the Father to the Son through the Holy Spirit,” he wrote in May 1959.

Ordained a priest, Pierre joyfully joined the small Dominican community in Algiers which, under the guidance of Cardinal Duval, contributed to the existence of a new type of Church, a Church for a country whose population was predominantly Muslim. For this reason, he learned Arabic well enough that he could teach it to others. But above all, “he learned Algeria,” establishing a magnificent network of Algerian friends who meant a great deal to him. As the country began the process of reconstruction after a bloody war (1954-1962), there was a lot to do in the education and training of leaders. Pierre Claverie made his contribution with the priests and religious of Algeria who put themselves at the service of their neighbors, collaborating in the development of the country. It was a very happy period of his life. He offered a beautiful homage to these friends, present in the Cathedral of Algiers on the day of his episcopal ordination: “my Algerian brothers and friends, I owe to you who and what I am today. You welcomed me and supported me through your friendship. I owe to you my discovery of Algeria. Although it is my country, I lived in it as a stranger throughout my youth. With you, learning Arabic, I learned, above all, to speak and

understand the language of the heart, that of fraternal friendship through which peoples and religions communicate. In this regard, perhaps I am weak and fallible but I believe that this friendship withstands time, distance, separation. Because I believe that it comes from God and leads to God.” His solid formation led him to participate decisively in the theological reflection of a Church that needed to rethink the meaning of its presence in Algeria. It was not there to proselytize among Muslims. On the contrary, through the witness of faith and its gratuitous action in the service of the country and of

its humblest people, the Church could offer an active presence of evangelical love and help heal the wounds inherited from the colonial past and the war of liberation. Only the fruitfulness of witness and the work of the Holy Spirit can convert hearts and move them in freedom towards Christ and his Church. In this capacity, Pierre Claverie assumed the direction of the diocesan center of studies in Algiers and collaborated with the bishops on the drafting of theological documents that attempted to articulate the meaning of a Christian presence in a Muslim world. In 1981, his strong personality and personal charisma earned him the nomination as bishop of Oran, in the west of the country. His diocese had few faithful, but it was international, and Pierre loved his role as a builder of communion, not only among Christians of different origins, but also with Muslim friends of the Church. He made the choice to make the property and buildings of his diocese available for the needs of the country: libraries for students, a reception center for people with disabilities, a training center for women. With his Muslim collaborators, he established relationships of trust and friendship that would prove to be precious during the tragic decade of the 1990s. God alone can bring a heart to conversion. The Christian faithful are few in number, but a true Christian witness can be given to all the Muslims with whom Christians live and work daily. On the occasion of a conference at the Paris mosque in June 1988, Pierre rejected political hypocrisy and stressed, without hesitation, that “in the ensemble of relations that have marked the relationship between Christians and Muslims, dialogue has not always been the rule.” Indeed, he said, the opposite had often been the case. “Polemics and controversies.” Continuing his frankness, he pointed out the obstacles. Beyond the vicissitudes of history, he said, the underlying problem is the difficulty of “acknowledging and accepting otherness.” When dialogue was limited to words, often ambiguous, sometimes misleading, Pierre Claverie preferred encounter, since the latter involved people. He maintained that nothing could be done if it did not start with creating bonds of trust and friendship. This is what allows things to be accomplished together, allows people to face common challenges and even more complex questions. The Christian must be able to explain why their faith in the Trinity is not polytheism; the Muslim, in turn, will be able to underline how the text of the Koran or the personality of Mohammed moved them, things that are so misunderstood by Christians. One of the miracles these meetings can achieve is to help heal the wounds of the past, which make the relationship between Christians and Muslims often hindered by tenacious fears and prejudices. The reciprocal and honest knowledge of a healthy dialogue between religions helps to promote religious

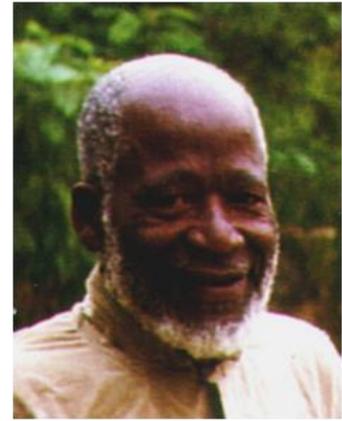
freedom, the right to proclaim and to witness, the right to free conversion and religious adherence. Beginning in 1990, Algeria fell into a decade of violence. The new political openness of a multi-party system after twenty-five years with a single-party regime favored the emergence of radical religious parties. At the time of the local legislative elections, these parties garnered the majority of the votes and were just about to take power when, in 1992, the military regime decided to stop the electoral process in order to prevent the establishment of a religious dictatorship. Frustrated by not being able to obtain power through voting, the fundamentalist fanatics tried to take it with arms. They began by assassinating hundreds of representatives of the state (judges, police officers), then moved on to the symbolic figures of an open civil society (journalists, writers), and finally, they targeted foreigners. The murder of the first two Christian religious, in May 1994, was a trauma for everyone. The killing of the seven Trappist monks in 1996 scandalized the great majority of Muslims. Pierre Claverie was the last Christian killed. It must be added that he had not only made the choice to remain in Algeria but also, and above all, to speak courageously, expressing himself publicly in favor of a “plural, non-exclusive humanity.” He said, “We are exactly in our proper place, since it is only in this place that we can glimpse the light of the Resurrection and, with it, the hope of a renewal of our world.” He was assassinated on August 1, 1996, along with a Muslim friend, Mohamed Bouchikhi, who had made the choice to stay with him despite the risks. His death shocked not only Christians but also many Muslim Algerians who, at his funeral, said they had come to weep over a man who was also “their” bishop.

SIMON MPECKE (1906-1975)

Simon Mpecke was born in 1906 in Log Batombe, in Cameroon. In 1914, at age 8, Mpecke attended the elementary school of the Catholic mission in Edea.

It was a mission opened by the Pallottine order during the period German colonization. At age 11, Mpecke finished elementary school. On August 14, 1918, at the age of 12, he was baptized in Edea by Father Louis Chevrat, and the day after he made received his first Communion.

Later he became a teacher, first in the schools of the savannah and later in the central mission of Edea. In 1920, he obtained a diploma of indigenous teacher from the Catholic mission of Edea and in 1923, he became the head teacher of the mission.



On August 8, 1924, Simon entered the small seminary of Yaounde. In 1917, he transferred to the newly opened major seminary of Myolye, where he did two years of philosophy and four years of theology, completing his studies in December 1935. On December 8 of that same year he was among the first natives of Cameroon to be ordained a priest. This priestly ordination was an important stage in the history of the Church of Cameroon and inaugurated a new era for the country. As his first ministry, Simon was appointed to serve in the Ngovayang mission, where he took a firm stand against the practices of traditional religions in the region. In 1947, he was appointed to the parish of the New-Bell district in Douala and the following year he became its pastor. He provided strong leadership and increased participation in several lay organizations. He supported the activities of Catholic Action and the parish school, demonstrating great availability and abundant generosity. Also in 1947, by chance, Father Simon read an article that described the life of pagan populations in northern Cameroon. From then onwards he began to experience a great fondness for these people. The establishment of the fraternity of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus in his parish brought him closer to the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. In 1953, Father Simon Mpecke joined the Secular Institute of the Little Brothers of Jesus and left for a year of novitiate in Algeria. He was one of the international founders of the Priestly Union "Jesus Caritas" and became its first member in Cameroon and for a while he thought of living permanently with the Brothers.

On April 21, 1957, Pope Pius XII published the Encyclical *Fidei Donum*, which inspired Fr. Simon to leave his native land to be a *fidei donum* missionary priest in northern Cameroon. In February 1959, at the request of Bishop Plumey, Father Simon went to Tokombere to establish a mission to reach the Kirdi, a name that means "the pagans." By this time the majority of the population in Southern Cameroon were Bantu Christians, the north was populated mainly by Muslims of Sudanese origin.

Dr. Joseph Maggi, a Swiss doctor, had already established a small hospital in the village, in a place where there were only a few leaders of the French colonial administration and technicians who were introducing the cultivation of cotton. The beginnings of the Catholic Mission of Tokombere were an exceptional missionary experience. The task was not easy because Fr. Simon was not member of a local tribe and was, therefore, perceived as a danger. However, the fact that he was African made things easier. From the beginning, teaching the Kirdi became his daily preoccupation. His legendary goodness soon earned him the nickname "Baba," which means father, patriarch, sage, and guide at the same time. Everyone – men and women, adults and children, Kirdi and Muslims – began to spontaneously call him Baba. At Tokombere, Baba Simon lived out God's promise to Abraham – whose exodus and mission, allowed the birth of a people.

Faith and friendship with Jesus convinced him that only love for the whole person would save him from the spiritual evil of sin and ignorance, and from the material evil of misery and ethnic and religious discrimination.

For Baba, school was a lifeline and his school brought hope to make people blossom in their fight against ignorance, tyranny, and fear, which was Baba's way of fighting for human dignity. He decided to bring education "home," giving everyone the opportunity to attend the "school under the tree," a school in the midst of everything, in the very heart of the Kirdi's life.

He went on to establish Saint Joseph School in Tokombere and obtained permission to open other schools in Bzeskawe, Rindrime, and Baka. He created a boarding school for the boys and another for the girls, which was run by the Servants of Mary. Baba Simon taught the Kirdis to love Muslims as their blood brothers and did the same with the Muslims towards the Kirdis. Through the school, the health clinics, his commitment against injustice, and an appeal to universal brotherhood, Simon helped bring about a real improvement of the living conditions of the Kirdi populations, too long neglected by the rest of the country. His concern for a constant dialogue with the leaders of traditional religions makes him a prophetic precursor of interreligious dialogue called for by the Second Vatican Council.

He loved to travel and the first reason that motivated him to do so was to find the necessary assistance for his work with the Kirdi, especially for the students, inside and outside the community. His efforts brought him to France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Israel. He shared the life of the Kirdi, their poverty, and their struggle against misery. His evangelization was imbued with prayer, love for the Church, and charity with respect to their traditions.

After an extended stay in France to seek treatment for a sickness, Baba Simon died on August 13, 1975. He was buried in Tokombere.